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A funny thing happened at the symphony the other night. A concert by the great Berlin Philharmonic sounded like lousy hi-fi.

It was as if art were imitating bad technology. Ensconced in orchestra seats T1 and T3, designated “Prime Orchestra” in San Francisco’s Davies Symphony Hall, I and longtime audio consultant and dealer Tim Marutani were befuddled by what we heard. For all their vaunted superiority, the Berlin Philharmonic, conducted by Sir Simon Rattle, sounded like a dim, disordered mess. Highs were flat and lifeless, the midrange was muddled, and the deep double basses sounded so unfocused that I couldn’t distinguish their pitches. The overloaded bass blast by the souped-up, late-20th-century Buicks that set off car alarms as they zoom through my neighborhood distinguished their pitches. The overloaded bass blast by the souped-up, late-20th-century Buicks that set off car alarms as they zoom through my neighborhood suddenly sounded like accurate reflections of the live acoustic experience.

It was a dispiriting case of “Pass the live, give me the Memorex.” All I could think was how much better the Berlin Philharmonic sounded “canned” through my home reference system than it did in person.

To make matters worse, this was my second consecutive night of bad sound in Davies. Although the fine folks in the San Francisco Symphony’s Public Relations Department know my preference for orchestra seats closer in, I wasn’t on assignment that night. Hence, the ideal orchestra seats—where highs arrive with thrilling brilliance, winds and low strings are in sharp focus, and percussion has sufficient space to bloom—went to others critics.

I’d spent that first night with the Berliners very far from my reference seats: in the first row of the First Tier. There, the sound was so flat and lifeless that I was unable to compare the sound of the Berlin Philharmonic under Rattle to that of the San Francisco Symphony under Michael Tilson Thomas. Were the strings as soaring, the clarinet as colorful, the phrasing as persuasive? I couldn’t tell. People around me were cheering Schoenberg’s arrangement for full orchestra of Brahms’s Piano Quartet 1 and Brahms’s unretouched Symphony 1, but I was wishing I were home, listening to the Berlin Phil’s new set of Brahms symphonies on my reference system.

Crazy, isn’t it? There I was, a music lover privileged to have gratis seats for one of the finest orchestras in the world, and instead I longed for the audio rig I’m blessed to have: PS Audio Perfect Wave disc transport, Theta Digital Gen.VIII Series 2 DAC, VTL Signature 2 monoblocks, Talon Khorus X speakers, Bybee Golden Goddess, and Nordost Odin cables/Quantum mains conditioner, all supported by either Cerapacs or Marigo Magic feet, and accompanied by Synergistic Research ART and Shakti Hallograph and Stone treatments, with a MacBook Pro laptop running Amara, a prototype Wavelength Wavelink USB-to-S/PDIF converter, and a Kimber Kable USB.

Then, on the second night, things changed. Between the Prelude to Act I of Wagner’s Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg and Schoenberg’s Chamber Symphony 1, I gestured to Tim that we could move up one row, to S1 and S2.

“Do you think three feet will make a difference?” he asked.

I suppressed a wink. “Only one way to find out.”

Those three feet turned out to be crucial. Just one row forward, highs gained in life and clarity, and the instruments in the midrange began to come into focus. The basses were still a woeful mess, but at least there was some slight indication that they were playing in tune.

Warily wondering what the still-dim acoustic might do to Brahms’s Symphony 2, I spied empty seats in Row M, in the center section. Although Tim was nervous about occupying the seats of possible latecomers, I assured him that we could always scoot back to our original spots if need be.

Moving forward brought further revelations. Bass notes now had distinct pitch, and the highs, if not as brilliant as on MTT’s optimally miked SACD recordings of Mahler’s symphonies, were far livelier than through many of the dismaying dark systems I’ve blogged about and reviewed.

But something far more important than instrumental clarity had been achieved. Brahms had been given back his soul. The great man, who so touchingly expresses our innermost longings while affirming the essential beauty and holiness of life, was again able to reach deep into our beings and touch us to the core.

What a thrilling experience his Symphony 2 became. When Sir Simon rallied the Berliners for the fourth-movement climax, the glorious clarity, color, and eloquence of it all propelled to their feet virtually everyone in the audience who could stand unassisted. We whooped and cheered, as much for Brahms as for the musicians who had transformed notes on paper into a transcendent experience.

As Tim and I half-floated out the door, we discussed his forthcoming visit to Los Angeles’s Disney Hall, to hear the Berlin Philharmonic perform the same program. I begged him to tell me about any differences in sound and the resulting emotional impact he might notice.

Tim returned with a glowing report of Disney Hall’s acoustic. Although I’d spent hours on the Disney stage when the hall was empty, covering a Yarlung Records recording session for Stereophile, I had never sat in one of the hall’s prime orchestra seats for a public concert. Imagine my surprise when Tim told me that, seated virtually the same distance from the Berlin Philharmonic in Disney as we had in Row M of Davies, the sound was considerably more focused, articulated, and vibrant; the ambient decay was more audible; and the music was far more moving.

What does all this say to audiophiles? Certainly, it underscores the importance of the correct placement of loudspeakers and listening seats. If, in a huge, multi-tiered concert hall, a shift of only three feet can noticeably improve the quality of the experience, think of the difference that moving speakers by ½”, or your listening position forward or back a bit, can make in a far smaller room.

It also flies in the face of a major audio truism. As much as black-and-white dualistic thinking may declare that live is better than canned, it ain’t necessarily so. It all depends on the acoustic of the concert venue, where you’re sitting, and the quality of your system and setup at home.

Forget declarations that high-end audio is always inferior to live acoustic sound. There are times when high-end audio can actually sound better, and move us more, than the in-person experience. In the worst cases, which occur all too frequently—in halls designed more for looks than for sound, and in amplified environments where noise and distortion pass for music—you may find yourself running home after a concert to hear all that you’ve just missed.

Next time a veteran concertgoer tries to dismiss your audiophile reality, you might suggest they test their assumptions by coming over to enjoy some great recordings, and possibly hear the music they love sound better than it would live.
WEIRD SCIENCE

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COLUMNS

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The hi-fi industry refers to racks and other equipment supports as "isolation devices", going to great lengths to describe how these products protect electronic components from the outside world. Unfortunately, structure born mechanical energy is the least of your system's mechanical problems!

In fact, the greatest damage to sound quality is done by vibration generated within the equipment itself; from the mains transformer, the power supply caps charging and discharging, every resistor or transistor that passes the signal. And although that vibration might be small, it's also right where the fragile audio signal is, right where it can do most damage. And to make matters worse, most of your equipment comes with soft rubber feet, meaning there's nowhere for that vibrational energy to go. It just carries on circulating round the unit's internals until it finally dissipates. That's why hard cones or couplers work under audio equipment; they offer an exit route for that energy, so that it can dissipate in the supporting surface.

But not all cones are created equal...

Nordost's new Sort Kones offer a superior solution to the problem of evacuating unwanted microphonic or vibrational energy from your audio components. They employ functionally optimized, mechanically tuned construction and carefully selected materials to provide a low impedance exit path. These different materials provide four distinct price and performance levels to suit all systems. And because every piece of equipment has a different structure, there's an extensive user guide to ensure that you achieve the best possible performance from your Kones, your components and even your speakers, so...

Get Your System Sorted!
Eric Hartman and his son, Elmer, left Southern California in 1980 to escape the smog. Within a few years, they owned a precision machine shop in Salem, Utah—a rural enclave in the middle of the state.

In 1991, Dave and Sheryl Wilson and their children relocated their nascent speaker company from Northern California to Provo, Utah. They went looking for a local machinist to provide them with all the metal parts (aluminum ports, alignment blocks, spikes, cover plates, etc.) for their loudspeakers.

Over the years, the two companies have formed a strategic bond. For the Wilsons, it means leveraging the decades of experience and capital investment of master craftsmen. For the Hartmans, the Wilson contract provides all the work they can handle, which, as Eric says, is fine, because he he naturally gravitates toward clients who share his passion for quality. Elmer, who took time off from his apprenticeship to attend music school, loves making parts for a product that enhances people’s enjoyment of life.

Wilson Audio has grown large enough to have the best-selling loudspeakers in several price categories, the result of staying small enough to value the work of dedicated craftspeople who invest love and pride in all they do.

Watch the Hartman’s at work at wilsonaudio.com Click on Company, then Authentic Values.
Nizar Akhrass
Editor:
Just found out that Nizar Akhrass, of May Audio Marketing, passed away recently. He was a very nice and kind man and always treated us (his customers) with respect and patience. I hope you will find some space in the magazine to mention what a great man he was and what a loss this is for our little community.

—Nick Lakoumentas
Montreal, Canada
nlakoume@algol.concordia.ca

Yes, a sad loss for the high-end audio industry. Nizar was rushed to the emergency room Friday, April 9, with very low blood pressure following cataract surgery a day or two earlier. He was admitted to the hospital but had two cardiac events in rapid succession. Just days earlier, Nizar had been given a Lifetime Achievement Award at the 2010 Salon Son et Image in Montreal; see http://blog.stereophile.com/ssa2010/nizar_akhrass.

—John Atkinson

Don't get fooled again!
Editor:
I grinned the whole way through Artie's May write-up on restoring Large Advent speakers from the memories it evoked. Back in the day, my audiophile pal had a pair of Advents while I opted for the EPI sound. I foolishly sold my two pairs of circa-1973 EPI 100s in the 1990s during a couple of downsizing periods. It didn't take long for me to track down another set a few years later.

After reading Art's piece, I did the only thing I could do: I dropped 40-year old music on the 'table and let them babies crank. We won't get fooled again.

—Richard Crimi
Beaveron, OR
richard_crimi@hotmail.com

Why is that?
Editor:
Start reviewing a lot more pop/rock music, as I have very few classical/jazz customers coming through the doors.

—Chris Papas
Valatie, NY
www.criticallistener.com

Getting fooled?
Editor:
Art Dudley writes correctly, in the January 2010 issue, of the disdain shown for the American consumer by mass-marketeers and advertisers, but I think he lets the audio industry off a bit easy in his answer to the question "Do the people who make the audio products you cherish think you're an idiot?" Art's opinion is that the industry is doing its best to produce products that make our music sound good, but a review of a recent online list of stocking stuffers for the family audiophile suggests otherwise to me. $50 RCA caps? $500 piezoelectric LP stabilizers? $25,000 cables? Shakti Stones and Hallographs? $200 carbon-fiber cartridge screws? Ceramic cable elevators? Dark-field cable elevators? CD cleaners to remove the "oily" sound?

I can think of few other industries that sell so many questionable items for as much money as the audio industry. As with every purchase one makes, let the buyer beware, but I think Art lets the industry off way too easy.

—Mark D. Lindquist
Detroit Lakes, MN
mark@ndlindquist.com

Extra thanks
Editor:
Thank you, Art Dudley, for your article on restoring Large Advent speakers. In the early 1970s I bought a set of Smaller Advents. I'm ashamed to say that I drifted away from listening to much music, and the Advents were banished to a shelf in the garage. Two years ago, when I decided to return to something that might be called serious listening, I did several things right away. I subscribed to Stereophile, got those Smaller Advents down from the garage shelf, and then read Robert Reina's 2006 article on the Smaller Advents at www.stereophile.com/historical/506advent.

My Smaller Advents were, predictably, in pretty bad shape. While the cabinet and grille fabric still looked great, the speaker cones were in shreds. I took the speakers to SpeakerWorks here in Tulsa and got back wonderfully restored equipment. But I knew soon enough that I just had to have those Large Advents. I did some looking on the Web but found that the prices were fairly high—especially considering the shipping charges. Then, one Saturday morning, I had a call from one of my students, a genuine audiophile. He called to say that he had found a beautiful set of Large Advents at a bargain price at an antique mall. Even better, they had been recently restored. I didn't get the price that Art Dudley got, but then, I was simply glad to have the Large Advents. Needless to say, I bought them. Then I had the good folks at SpeakerWorks do a bit of extra checking. The cabinet is in great shape, as is the fabric. I have a modest system—a Creek Audio EVO player and the Rega Brio 3 amp—but I won't reveal the name and age of my turntable, since I don't want Mr. Fremer to cast me into outer darkness. Thanks again to Art Dudley for a great article, and an extra thanks to Robert Reina for his review of the Smaller Advents.

—Jim Ronda
Tulsa, OK
james-ronda@utulsa.edu

What can we learn?
Editor:
I immensely enjoyed Art Dudley's May 2010 "Listening" (p.33), in which he resurrected two moribund Large Advent Loudspeakers. Many good memories from 1973 came back, when I owned a pair of them and listened to Pink Floyd's Dark Side of the Moon and two Sheffield Labs direct-to-disc cuts over and over again. I loved those speakers, and didn't replace them until 1979 (with ESS AMT 1bs). Since I have also felt that the Large Advents did a lot of things inherently right, I wonder if it would be possible to convince Art—and his daughter—to give them up for a week or two for a detailed John Atkinson diagnosis. Maybe we can learn something.

—Rainer Alpert
El Paso, TX
ralpert@elprr.com

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An unusual marriage
Editor:
My favorite Art Dudley columns are those in which he brings old gear back to life, and I really enjoyed his garage-sale Advent piece in May. It should be noted, however, that his were an unusual marriage of the first- and second-generation Large Advents. The cabinet, with its deeply recessed baffle and Masonite-mounted tweeter, is first-generation, while the facts that the tweeter had no protective metal grille and a resultant dimpled center dome indicate that it was an early original Advent. (The pair I purchased in 1973 had the grille.) However, the woofers in Art’s pair are from the second generation, introduced in 1977 and dubbed the New Large Advent. They crossed over at a higher frequency than the original to a ferrofluid-cooled tweeter. (I bought those also, and still have them in the basement.) Although the newer woofer’s specs were supposed to be very close to the originals, which had a large Masonite ring to which the surround was attached, I’m not sure Art is hearing the speaker as Henry Kloss and Andy Petite intended. New capacitors and an undented tweeter would get Art closer to the original sound.
—Jeff Kaschyk

More, please
Editor:
I enjoyed Art Dudley’s piece about restoring Advents. However, it appears that the Advents Mr. Dudley restored were something of a hybrid: the cabinets and tweeters look like they’re from original Large Advents, while the metal-frame woofers are from New Large Advents, which came out in 1973 or so. I also think the 1970s price cited by Mr. Dudley is too low. If memory serves, Utility Advents had a list price of $102/speaker, with real-wood Advents costing a bit more.

There are a good number of vintage audiophile out there refoaming Advents, re-capping Dynaco A-25s, and trying to figure out the problematic potentiometers of AR-2axes. I think many of us who were just getting our feet wet in the 1970s (and are currently getting back into the old stuff that we couldn’t afford as kids) would enjoy more reports about “vintage” gear.
—C.H. Sides

My “Letters” in-box has been a horrorshow lately: I read everything that comes in, but only by peeking between the fingers that cover my eyes. Thus the letters from Messrs. Ronda, Alberti, et al were pleasant surprises. Thank you.
—Bon Clarke

I’d never owned Advents before this pair, and I’m certainly not a collector, so I was intrigued until recently that the woofers in my $15 lawn-sale speakers weren’t original. As I believe the piece made clear, my goal was to repair a cheap, broken pair of loudspeakers so that my 12-year-old daughter could use them in her bedroom. But I understand how a very serious Advent enthusiast would be upset to read—or hear of—a story about his favorite product that contains an error such as the one I made.
Hopefully, there’s enough good information in the column that it remains worthy of most readers’ attention. Meanwhile, I’ll exercise greater care the next time I choose a DIY project as a subject for my column.
—Art Dudley

Arc Angles
Editor:
I very much enjoyed Keith Howard’s article “Arc Angles,” in March, although I suspect many readers struggled through much of the technical aspects. I became serious about vinyl replay as a graduate electrical-engineering student in the 1970s, and vinyl is still my preferred audio format. I have collected many alignment protractors over 40 years, and my favorite is one produced by Max Towishend, designer of the Rock turntables, Excaliber tonearms, and Seismic Sinks. The Elite Alignment Gauge (UK Patent 7923545) shows distortion due to tracking error at any position, and is quite illuminating about the nature of the relationship. The indicated minimum and maximum groove radii are 146 and 58mm, respectively, in agreement with Keith Howard’s conclusions.
I obtained the Elite Protractor in the late ’70s, and found that the distortion generated by a cartridge properly set up in the SME IV tonearm is limited to between the 1% contours. Regarding the SME-supplied alignment gauge, it appears to give close agreement to conventional protractors even though it is a single-point device. Why might this be?
I was most intrigued with Fig 4 of Keith’s article, showing the phase shift associated with tracking distortion compared with the same amount of second-harmonic distortion in electronic amplification. I have noticed, with my precisely aligned loudspeakers, that the position of the hot seat is at a slightly different point on the speakers’ axis of symmetry for LPs compared to digital sources. The difference is approximately 4–6° on the symmetry axis. I feel vindicated that there are relative phase shifts associated with tracking-error distortion that can affect the timing and perceived imaging of stereo signals. I will continue with my to-and-fro seat shuffle.
—Bon Clarke

To put the horse in its correct place, ahead of thecart. Max Towishend’s protractor shows a minimum radius of 58mm at my recommendation! Max and I go back a long way, and I'd published my original finding; that 58mm is a practical figure to use, before the Elite Alignment Gauge came into existence. Note that I now suggest 56mm, just to play safe.

Keith Howard

Thank you
Editor:
Thank you for making archive-issue equipment reviews available through your website. They are especially helpful when considering the purchase of used equipment. What would be helpful, though, would be for you to include the manufacturer’s response to the review as part of the archive.
—Alan Calunas

Currently, I include the “Manufacturer's Comment” in a Web reprint only if it specifically addresses or clarifies something questionable that was discovered during the review. I don’t publish the letter if it basically just thanks the reviewer for the review coverage.
—John Atkinson

The final word
Editor:
I want to bring to your attention, in the strongest terms, that I have taken offense at all the letter-writing subscribers who have recently taken offense at something written in the pages of Stereophile. And as a customer—may I remind you that the customer is always right?—I insist that you silence their silly voices. After all, to paraphrase many of these offended subscribers, I don’t read Stereophile to gain perspective on how offended others are at any given moment. Instead, I read I’m Offended! magazine for that, where such diatribes rightly belong.
In fact, I don’t want you to ever publish anything that might remind me that anyone anywhere has an opinion or point of view different from mine. I’m outraged already at the possibility, and feeling slightly lightheaded at the thought of it.
I await your reassurance on these very important concerns. Your As-Offended-As-The-Others (and Could-Still-Cancel-His-Subscription-If-Unduly-Provoked) Squeaky-Wheel subscriber.
—Scott Anderson
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CALENDAR
Those promoting audio-related seminars, shows, and meetings should e-mail the when, where, and who to stephen.mejias@sorc.com at least eight weeks before the month of the event. The deadline for the September 2010 issue is June 23, 2010. We will reply with a confirmation. If you do not receive confirmation within 24 hours, please e-mail us again. If you prefer to communicate through fax, the number is (212) 915-4167.

Attention All Audio Societies:
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UK: WORTHING/STEYNING
Paul Messenger
The US market is so important to Bowers & Wilkins that the worldwide launch of its new premium line of loudspeakers, the 800 Series Diamond, was held in Las Vegas, at the 2010 Consumer Electronics Show. There was no sign of these new flagship models in B&W’s small room at the 2010 Sound & Vision Show, in Bristol, England, in February (see “Industry Update,” June, p.13), though there I did hear the company’s very impressive and extraordinarily compact new MM-1 computer speaker ($499/pair).

In March, the press was invited to a product launch at B&W’s factory and headquarters in Worthing, England. I hadn’t visited in eight years, and while much remained the same, so much had changed.

Although B&W now has a production facility in China, it is much smaller than their UK operation, and only their less costly products are made there. All 800 Series models are British-made—even the enclosures are now built in Worthing rather than Denmark, partly because UK manufacturing costs are lower. But perhaps it’s also because B&W’s core business of hi-fi speakers has shrunk some 20% in the past five years, and thus created some spare capacity in their capacious factory.

It’s no secret that, with the rise of the Apple iPod and computer audio, the market for hi-fi components has been declining. B&W has successfully diversified into these new areas, with products like the Zeppelin and Zeppelin Mini iPod-based systems, and now the MM-1. It has also forged a relationship to supply Jaguar Cars Limited. The current recession notwithstanding, B&W is enjoying its best-ever year in the UK.

Indeed, it appears that the UK hi-fi scene is doing rather better than that of many other nations. At the launch in Worthing, B&W Brand Manager Danny Haikin talked about Britain’s hi-fi market as being the “powerhouse of Europe”, and in late February, at a press conference at the Bristol show, Nick Simon, of market researchers Grk, had described 2009 as “better than you might have expected” for UK hi-fi in general. According to Grk, although the total sales of UK hi-fi separates is now at a historic low, it seems to have stabilized over the past four years. Sales are currently recovering after a weak mid-2009, and more than a quarter of sales now comes from components costing +£1000. However, across the audio market as a whole, portable components continue to dominate: their sales are now worth five times the separates sector, whereas 10 years ago the two were more or less equal.

B&W is keeping close tabs on the portable sector. Recently they introduced their first luxury headphone, the PS ($299.95), but the new 800 Series Diamond speakers are also well placed to suit the demand for upmarket separates. Evincing a combination of confidence and bravery, the new models look just like their predecessors. The 801D, never my favorite B&W loudspeaker—I much preferred the two 10" woofers of the 800D to the 801D’s single 15" cone—has been dropped, but most of the others remain, albeit with numerous changes in interior details: and significantly higher prices. (For example, the third-generation 800 costs $24,000/pair). The main changes are in the drive-unit motors, in which a new quad-magnet arrangement is claimed to improve tweeter sensitivity, and two neodymium magnets are said to enhance bass-driver linearity. B&W has also designed for the new models terminals of solid oxygen-free copper, and
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- John Atkinson, Stereophile

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- Jeff Dorgay, Tone Audio

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Citing “recent research findings” that have made it necessary, the German music-publishing house of C.F. Peters, in cooperation with the Internationale Gustav Mahler Gesellschaft and the Kaplan Foundation, has issued a New Critical Edition of the score of Gustav Mahler’s Symphony 6.

In the preface of the new edition, renowned Mahler enthusiast and philanthropist Gilbert Kaplan states that “it is now clear” that the Critical Edition of 1963’s ordering of the inner movements—first the Scherzo (Wshwig), then the Andante—was “a mistake” that has had drastic and lasting con-
sequences for scholarship, performance practice, and recordings. Both Kaplan’s preface and the foreword, by editor-in-chief Reinhold Kubik, credit classical-music recording engineer Jerry Bruck, of New York City’s Posthorn Recordings, for undertaking (on his own initiative) the meticulous primary research, then writing the monograph that proves that once Mahler himself had changed the order of the inner movements from Scherzo-Andante to Andante-Scherzo, he never changed them back, and never instructed anyone else to.

Bruck’s monograph on the proper order of the inner movements of the Sixth, “Undoing a ‘Tragic’ Mistake,” is available for free download as part of editor Kaplan’s The Correct Movement Order in Mahler’s Sixth Symphony (New York: Kaplan Foundation, 2004; www.posthorn.com/Mahler/Correct_Movement_Order_Ill.pdf).

The New Critical Edition of Mahler’s Sixth Symphony is published in hard-bound quarto (12” by 9¼”), is 414 pages long and entirely newly typeset, contains extensive critical commentary, and makes other corrections, including replacing a number of wrong notes. It is C.F. Peters’ Edition Number EP 11210, and will retail in the US for $150.

UK: HEATHROW AIRPORT, LONDON
Paul Messenger

While the great and the good of the hi-fi industry were all heading for Montreal at the end of March for the Salon Son & Image hi-fi show, a rather smaller contingent was making its way to the Park Inn Hotel at London’s Heathrow Airport, for what has become an attractive niche event on the UK’s annual hi-fi calendar, the London High Fidelity Show 2010, organized by the Chester Group.

This small two-day specialist hi-fi show may not attract anywhere near the numbers that visit the broader-based Bristol event, held a month earlier. But because it costs less to exhibit at Heathrow, it attracts smaller specialist operations, which means plenty of tubes and vinyl.

And, invariably, there are some nice surprises. As I entered one large room,
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two enormous **Triangle** Magellan Grand Concert SW2 loudspeakers, biamped with four **Emillé Labs** tube amps, suddenly burst to life, playing one of my all-time favorite tracks, the Grateful Dead’s “Deep Ellum Blues” from **Reckoning**—a welcome relief from the anodyne pseudo-jazz that seems to dominate most hi-fi show demos.

The turntables on show included models from **Simon Yorke**, **Dr. Feickert**, the **Funk Firm** (Arthur Khoubessarian), **Artemis Labs** (Frank Schroeder), and **Isokinetic**, to name just a few, several of them fitted with allegedly improved versions of **Rega** tonearms. The Funk Firm has long offered carbon-fiber-based modifications for **Linn**’s Sondek tables, the latest being the Ankhor subchassis, an alternative to Linn’s official Keel.

Tube amps at least matched solid-state devices in numbers and distribution, from **Atma-Sphere**’s brutal-looking, output-transformer-less models to classic **McIntosh Labs** MC275s to **Art Audio**’s Adagio monoblocks, the last delightfully fashioned and decorated in blue illuminated Pyrex glassware.

Among loudspeakers, importer **ABC Audio** introduced the Secret, an extraordinary “ultima stand-mount” from Spanish company **ADN Acoustics**. The Secret weighs no less than 100 lbs (plus additional fill of sand and lead shot within the enclosure walls), its enclosure built up from a succession of sections of cast alloy, to give the speaker the segmented appearance of a centipede. The interior of each segment is molded into multiple pyramid shapes, spreading reflections and resonances, thus avoiding the need for any damping material in the airspace. An Apple iPod fed **MSB**’s DAC4 D/A converter and **MSN2** power amps, all linked with cables from **Synergistic Research**.

**Revolver**’s **Mike Jewitt** is producing a new and substantially more costly Gold Reference variation on his relatively compact but very substantial two-box Cygnus loudspeaker. The larger drive-units, all new, include a 15'' (380mm) woofer, the external crossover now has better components, and the design of the enclosure has been advanced.

**Max Townshend** of **Townshend Audio** showed several new products, including the wide Glastonbury Tor speaker, whose two “focused-line” driver arrays are placed side by side: four port-loaded bass/midrange units alongside six leaf tweeters that operate from 5kHz up. There’s also a super tweeter, another leaf unit on the rear, decoupling Stella stands, and the option of active or passive drive. Another newcomer was **Townshend’s** simple, high-quality Glastonbury Pre1, a transformer-based passive preamplifier.

And **Amphion**’s Anssi Hyvönä was on hand to show off the creatively colorful variations available for his much smaller and more affordable Ion speaker.

Although much of the fare left a decidedly retro impression, there was a more aggressively high-tech contingent. In the room shared by **Focal**, **dCS**, and **Vertex AQ**, 24-bit/96kHz recordings from a laptop computer were being upsamped to DSD format via **dCS’s** U-Clock, **Puccini**, and **new Debussy DAC** to a **GamuT D200i** amplifier and a pair of **Focal’s Diablo Utopia** speakers.

This year’s Heathrow show might have been small, but there seemed to be something to interest every taste. It also provided a fine opportunity to take the temperature of serious hi-fi in Britain today, and check which way the wind was blowing.
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World Radio History
Call me contrarian. I began writing for this rag in 1983, as The Audio Cheapskate. I thought then, as I do now, that a lot of hi-fi is overhyped and overpriced. Too much marketing, not enough music. Too much science, not enough soul. Conventional wisdom had it at the time, and has it now, that reproduced sound could never sound as immediate, lifelike, and vibrant as real music—what some call the absolute sound. I have come to believe that this is wrong—and that reproduced music can come breathtakingly close to replicating the real thing.

Back then I relished bargains like the B&K ST-140 power amplifier ($399) and the original Supraphon Revelation Basic preamplifier ($299). When it came to speakers, though, I preferred the Quad ESL-63, which, at $3300/pair, was not cheap in the early ‘80s.

And with power amplifiers as with speakers, sometimes it pays to pay more. Good as the B&K ST-140 was, far better amps—and greater bargains—were available, such as the Quicksilver monoblocks (later known as the 8417 monos), at $1000/pair.

I discovered that the best values from a given maker of speakers or electronics (or cables and interconnects, for that matter) tend to be those one or two steps up from entry level or one or two rungs down from the flagship model. Focal’s Utopia series of speakers is quite spectacular; for far less money, the company’s Electra and Chorus lines offer more compelling value.

But there wasn’t enough good, cheap stuff to keep the Cheapskate interested. I envied reviewers who got the good-ies, while manufacturers assumed that anything above the bargain basement was trop cher for Sam. I couldn’t get Conrad-Johnson to send me anything more than their entry-level preamp. The Cheapskate had to go.

The Audio Contrarian might have been a more precise sobriquet, had it been as catchy as The Audio Cheapskate. My contrary nature has led me to tubes, to single-ended-triode (SET) amplification, and to hi-fi gear from Europe—particularly from France and Italy, where manufacturers, too, tend to question the conventional wisdom.

While French hi-fi is about la vitesse (speed), Italian hi-fi is about song: reproducing, above all, the human voice. It’s about the reproduction of harmonics. Who should know better than the Italians? I realize this is a glib generalization, but try it out: French gear is quick, clear, clean. So are French orchestras. Italian gear is . . . well, Italy isn’t known for its orchestras, which require musical discipline, but its regional opera is almost as popular as baseball. It’s a spectator sport akin to bullfighting in Spain. You want a blood sport? Try the opera house in Florence.

Italian hi-fi is about getting the harmonic structure right, beginning with the voice. French hi-fi tends toward the lean and ascetic: Italian leans toward the rich and romantic. The hi-fi of each nation reflects its culture and national character. The wines of neither country appear to suit the other, and the same is true, largely speaking, of the hi-fi (though I believe Focal speakers sell well in Italy). Germans buy plenty of French and Italian hi-fi.

Until about 30 years ago, there was no Italian hi-fi, and there wasn’t much French hi-fi, either. Italians bought hi-fi made in other countries, especially Britain and the US. Italians imported, for example, Cizek loudspeakers (remember them?). Once, a shipment of Cizek speakers arrived at an Italian importer’s establishment with damaged cabinets. The drivers and crossovers were fine. Throw away the speakers? Nah . . . make new cabinets, and salvage the drivers and crossovers. It then dawned on the importers: We can make these!

You may have read the name Franco Serblin before in these pages. A former “mechanical dentist” who made crowns, bridges, and false teeth, Serblin was associated with an electronics engineer, Giovanni Sacchetti, also from Vicenza. Serblin established Sonus Faber, in which Sacchetti was involved. Later, Sacchetti, still in Vicenza, went on to establish his own electronics firm, Unison Research. Thus began modern Italian hi-fi.

Opera Loudspeakers began when two other gentlemen needed work. Nicholas Green, a Brit fluent in Italian, was importing British loudspeakers into Italy. He, too, got the bug: why not make speakers in Italy? Why not export Italian speakers to drab, dingy, sun-starved Britain? He teamed up with Giovanni Nasta, erstwhile traffic engineers,

1 Sam’s first appearance in these pages was in the December 1983 issue (Vol.5 No.10), with a survey of moving-magnet phonograph cartridges. —Ed.

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cop and disco manager and a crackjack cabinetmaker, to start Opera. Meanwhile, Gianni Sacchetti had set up Unison Research in the hills above Vicenza, next to a free-range pig farm. The view was spectacular, as was the smell.

To make a long story short, Nasta purchased Unison Research, and another company, Advanced Research in Audio (ARIA), brought both companies under its roof but kept them as separate entities, knowing that making speakers and making electronics are two different things. Few designers are good at doing both.

Operas speakers are made on the first floor, Unison Research electronics on the second. Production and development staffs remain separate, but they share a front office, listening and conference rooms, café, and wine cellar. Unison claims to be the largest maker of tubed gear in Europe, maybe the world; their components are hugely popular in Asia. (McIntosh Laboratory is much larger, of course, but only some of their products are tubed. Nearly all of Unison's models have been tubed, according to Sacchetti.) And yes, I have seen the production facilities, both at the pig farm and in the modern factory, outside Treviso.

Unison's founder, Sr. Sacchetti, remains in charge of research, development, and production. His chief design associate is Dr. Leopoldo Rossetto, professor of electronics at the University of Padua and president of a department there: the Professors' College of Electronics and Information. We are talking about two serious men of science, the roots of one of whom go down to the very beginnings of Italian hi-fi, and neither of whom must do this for a living. "The pride and the passion" is more than Unison's slogan; it's a motto. And perhaps because they're serious scientists, they're aware of science's limits.

Sr. Sacchetti and Dr. Rossetto are both fluent in English, and I've had time to get to know them well, going back to the old digs at the pig farm outside Vicenza. Sr. Sacchetti doesn't seem to eat pork, which is quite choice in Vicenza (a city also known for its splendid horsemeat carpaccio).

As is known in Italy but not always elsewhere, science gives you all the answers in advance, and often those answers are wrong. Italians invented modern science, along with what we call western civilization. While the Germans and the British were still running around dressed in animal hides, the Italians were establishing the universities of Bologna (ca 1088) and Padua (ca 1222).

It may be no accident that serious Italian hi-fi was born in Vicenza, the birthplace of the first great modern architect: Thomas Jefferson's icon, Andrea Palladio. There you'll find the Teatro Olimpico, designed by Palladio and finished in 1585. It's the world's oldest surviving indoor performing space; one can hear the proverbial pin drop. I have heard a chamber orchestra perform in this hall (Sacchetti subscribes to a chamber-music series there).

As Sacchetti, Nasta, Rossetto, and others well know, you can't sell Italian hi-fi unless it is Italian hi-fi—designed and manufactured in Italy, rooted in Italian culture. It wouldn't succeed if it aped what's made elsewhere. Fortunately, Italians buy a lot of Italian hi-fi. So do Germans and other Europeans, though not the French. Russians and Ukrainians buy it too, when the importers stay in business. Asians probably buy about half of all Italian hi-fi exports, maybe more. You can't design hi-fi in Italy, have it made in Shenzhen, China, and expect customers in Hong Kong or Singapore to buy it. It's like Italian luxury cars, glassware, shoes, and other leather goods: You must produce the products in Italy, from Italian materials (to the extent possible) worked by Italian craftsmen.

Italians love to make things. (I'm full of generalizations this month.) It's in the blood. Sacchetti so likes to make things that he crafts the faceplates for most of Unison's Unico products. Nasta, in less busy times, used to saw the wood for his speaker cabinets. Spend some time with Sr. Nasta and he's likely to take you to a Murano glass factory, for instance, where he knows the glassblowers and conducts the tour himself. Nasta would really love to make wine.

Gosh, I wonder if Unison Research could resume production of Italian vacuum tubes. No better place in all of Italy. Maybe no one in Italy knows more about tubes than Sr. Sacchetti. As for glassblowers, some of the Murano factories are about 20 minutes away. Italian vacuum tubes—what a gas! Or absence of same.

**Unison Research S9 integrated amplifier: $11,900**

I got wind of this amplifier several years ago, when I visited the Unison factory near Treviso. It wasn't yet ready to show—not even in prototype form—but the Unison Research Reference Pre and Reference Mono amplifiers are ready to go. You can have these three pieces for a song, or the price of a Metropolian Opera subscription: under $80,000 ($25,000 for the Reference Pre, $53,000 for the Reference Monos).

There's a lot of the Reference Pre in the S9 integrated ($11,900). Like the monoblocks, the S9 integrated is all-tube—no transistors in the signal path—and the output tubes are configured as parallel single-ended, when "common sense" (conventional wisdom) would predicate push-pull... or avoiding tubes in the first place.

During that visit I had the Reference system all to myself for an entire day at the factory, while my wife, Marina, went shopping in nearby Treviso. Yeah, they have factory outlets tourists don't know about, ones you won't find in Venice. Sandwiches were brought in, and a bottle was fetched from the wine cellar. Then another. I could play whatever I wanted. The speakers were Opera Grand Callases.

I enjoyed playing a *trecc* on Sr. Nasta. I brought the speakers forward by two meters, so they were almost in the center of the listening room, and spread them far apart so that I was listening as much through them as to them. Soundstage city. Nasta signed his disapproval; he likes his speakers placed
closer to the front wall. But what does he know? He's the manufacturer. (I had made sure the original positions were marked.)

Listening to the Reference system proved an unforgettable experience. These were probably the best electronics I have ever had time to listen to, at length, alone—not under show conditions, not with other people buzzing around, not with a manufacturer hovering over me.

The next year, I got to hear the Reference system again, this time with the flagship Opera Caruso speakers, when they were being installed at the casa of a famed Italian vintner. This time I had to leave the speakers in place. The sound was extraordinary: space, low-level resolution, harmonic immediacy.

The year after that, I heard a prototype of the S9 integrated at Unison and Opera's annual meeting, which that year was held on the island of Ischia. Marina and I booked a bargain flight to Naples on Eurofly to get there. (Wouldn't you?) This time, the speakers were the Unison Research Malibrans.

During these visits, I was struck by the similarity of sound from year to year, place to place, amplifier to amplifier. What I heard with the Malibrans driven by the S9 was, on an only slightly diminished scale, the sound I'd heard with the Reference Pre and Reference amps and the Carusos and Callases. But, being an integrated, the S9 was much more affordable and practical. Heh-heh. Practical is for John Atkinson.

If you want practical, you can buy a Unison Research Unico integrated amplifier for roughly one-fifth to one-third the price of the S9—hybrid tubed and solid-state. A Unico product makes more sense. And who knows? A Unico product might measure better than the S9, too. But what are you going to do with a hi-fi product: listen to it or test it? (I love the way Italians confuse the English verbs testing and tasting, as in testing the wine.)

The S9 is humongous. It weighs 110 lbs (50kg), and measures 17" (430mm) wide by 9.75" (250mm) high by 22.25" (570mm) deep. That's too deep for most conventional equipment shelves, and probably most tables. I used a 13"-high Liden table from IKEA, alas discontinued. I sat on the table first, to see if it would collapse. When it didn't, I deemed it sturdy enough to support the S9.

The great thing about having this beast in my listening room is that it's stuck here, probably until just before the 2011 Consumer Electronics Show. There's no way I can lift and pack it: that takes a team of two strong men, and it's an awkward heft—most of its weight is in the back. So it's going to stay here for a while. I'll take good care of it. Heh-heh-heh.

Like other Unison Research products, the S9 uses tubes from Russia: two ECC82 or 12AU7 tubes for the input and driver stages, and a pair of SV572-10 output tubes per channel in parallel single-ended mode.

You'd get more power operating the output tubes in push-pull, as Sr. Sacchetti and Dr. Rossetto well know. But you'd lose the magic of single-ended. Push-pull is a little like Humpty Dumpty—Crazy Glue notwithstanding, you can't put the phases together again. (I'm really going to get scolded now, by those who are better and more broadly versed in science than I.)

Were you ever into black-and-white?
photography and developing film yourself? Remember Ilford B&W film and Agfa Rodinal developer? That’s single-ended: texture, tonality, gradations. You can almost hear the shadows of the music. You can almost hear the gleam of the brass.

The S9 is said to deliver “around” 30–35W. You know, around. Some of Sacchetti’s amps measure 30W on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, and 35W on Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday. Only kidding. But if you’re buying this thing on the basis of power, or an EnergyStar rating, or approval from the Green Police, be advised that the power draw on the AC line is said to be 700W. Presumably, since the amp runs in class-A (it has to), this means 700W at all times. There’s about 11.5dB negative feedback—not to impress with measurements, but to obtain the best sound,” said Sr. Sacchetti.

As Sr. Sacchetti has told me on several occasions, a circuit that seems perfetto on paper can be anything but perfect in practice. It might not even work. I am reminded of a certain amplifier manufacturer who once told me that he didn’t need to listen to his amplifiers because he had already designed them perfectly in his mind. I will spare this manufacturer embarrassment in case he has changed that mind.

You choose Italian hi-fi because the designers do not have all the answers in advance. And they dare to rewrite the rulebook, or even throw it out. Do you see a similarity here with making wine? Musical instruments? Have you ever heard a Fazioli piano? It sounds like a single-ended Unison Research amplifier.

The four SV572-10 output tubes come from the Svetlana factory in my wife’s native city of St. Petersburg—two per channel, wired in single-ended parallel. Sr. Sacchetti told me he thinks single-ended sounds more... more naturale, the word I think Sacchetti used. Sacchetti described the SV572-10 power tube as being like a smaller 845. He uses the 845 power tube in his Reference and Smart 845 monoblocks.

As with the 845 output tube, the thoriated tungsten filaments in the SV572-10 should last a very long time, especially since each tube is given its own bias-adjustment knob, on the top of the chassis in front of the tubes. There’s a single bias meter. Just adjust each knob, if you have to, so the meter reads in the middle. Ecco. No tools or meter necessary. “With regular adjustment the amplifier will function at its best level of sonic performance for many years,” says the instruction manual. How many years? You know—molti anni. Many years.

Of course, you don’t want to leave the S9 on all the time, sucking 700W from the wall—and there’s no standby switch. It takes about 30 minutes to warm up. After an hour, it’s really cooking. These tubes run bright and hot—when they’re on, they’re on. Ecco! Notice, in the photo, that stainless-steel reflector screen. If it looks like a heat shield, that’s because it is. The shield protects the output transformers and the internal circuits from the heat of the tubes. (There’s an additional shield under the output tubes.)

The input and driver stages each use an ECC82 (12AU7) tube. Tube rolling is strongly discouraged. (If you want to see how a tube is made, you can watch Electrons on Parade, a 1942 promotional film...
“The longer you’ve been an audiophile, the more you need this book.”

As I travel around the country, speaking to audiophiles, hearing and voicing their systems, there seems to be one common trait that many “veteran audiophiles” have.

**Been there, done that**

They already know everything there is to know about audio set-up. In fact, my assistant reported hearing this statement as a couple of audiophiles were entering a seminar that I was giving: “I don’t really need this stuff I already know how to set up my system.”

Fortunately, their tone changed dramatically by the time they left the room, inquiring as to where they could buy *Get Better Sound*.

**How about you?**

Do you know everything there is to know about audio set-up? Really? The reason I ask is that every “veteran” I visit with—no matter how intelligent they may be, no matter how much they may have spent—has sound that is only average at best. They are amazed at how much more sound I am able to get from their systems—without replacing one component or cable! I simply employ the proven techniques in *Get Better Sound*.

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Best regards,

Jim Smith

*If you’re a serious listener, isn’t it time you made the ultimate upgrade? Order your copy of Get Better Sound today.*
especially in smaller rooms. At any rate, we’re not talking flea-watt here (defined as 2–10Wpc).

The S9 is for those who are willing to work around these limitations, because the limitations of push-pull can be even more deleterious to listening pleasure. We could get into endless discussions of whether single-ended amplifiers introduce excessive second-order harmonic distortion, or compress dynamics, etc. A great push-pull amp, tubed or solid-state, has its own virtues, and a poorly executed SET amp can be most unsatisfying.

Anyway, why should hi-fi be practical? What is it—a washing machine? An appliance to be tested by Consumer Reports? Why should it have to conform to conventional notions of design and engineering correctness? Why should it follow other people’s rules? If anything should go over the top, why not hi-fi? And who better to take it over than Italians?

The S9 is not for hard-rockers. It’s not for those who visit pubs and like to tap their toes. It’s for those who listen primarily to acoustical music, and seems especially well suited to classical and acoustic jazz. It is heavenly with voices, and with stringed instruments; it shares its Italian musical values with the architect Palladio and the great instrument makers of Brescia and Cremona in the 16th to 18th centuries—the workshops of Gasparo da Salò, Giovanni Paolo Mazzini, Stradivari, Guarneri, and Amati. Brescia is less than an hour’s drive from Vicenza, if I remember correctly. Same neck of the woods.

The Unison Research S9 is for those who want the humanities along with the sciences. More true to nature than push-pull? I don’t want to get scolded again by those more deeply and broadly versed in science. But all you have to do is listen, and disagree if you like. For me, when it comes to low-level resolution, immediacy, and harmonic structure, the S9 just nails it. It does space and sonority. It does harmonic accuracy. It gets the notes in register, just right.

The S9 lacks tremendous power, of course. And I’ve heard far less expensive amplifiers that can more tightly grip the bass drivers. The NAD C375BEE ($1299) comes to mind: compared to the S9, it’s a balls-to-the-wall, Krell-like machine. I recommend both amplifiers very highly for what each is, but the NAD is a machine, a tool; the S9 is a musical instrument. (Some of Unison Research’s Unico amplifiers are bone crushers, too.)

A great demo disc for the S9 is Venetian Brass (CD, Capriccio 5012). The composers include Gabrieli, Frescobaldi, and Guami. Edward Tarr conducts the HR Brass. Yes, the brass instruments nip at my ears; they’re supposed to. Notice the space of the Ilbenstadt Basilica, and the way the S9 lets you hear the musicians’ every breath. (Ilbenstadt is a district of the town of Niddatal, in Hesse, Germany, about 13 miles northeast of Frankfurt.)

I’ve been enjoying two boxed sets from the Amadeus Quartet: 27 Haydn string quartets and the complete Mozart quartets (respectively, Deutsche Grammophon 477 8116 and 477 8680). This is old-fashioned string playing of the highest order: warmth and expressiveness come before incisiveness and virtuosity. It’s always fascinating to compare the Amadeus (or the Quartetto Italiano) with a great modern-day quartet like the Emerson, or perhaps the Orion. I’m not saying whose performance values I prefer, but I love it when an amplifier lets me hear exactly what’s going on with the performance and the recording—and when an amp takes me back in time so that there and then become here and now.

I’ve always loved the late Leonard Bernstein conducting Schumann. The S9 took me to his concert performances of the symphonies with the Vienna Philharmonic via a bargain two-CD set (Deutsche Grammophon 453 049): the sweep, the drama, the angst, the joy. Not to mention the acoustical aura of the Musikverein. I was present at one of these concerts, and now I can be present again. Emotional excess works with Schumann.

Of course, what the Unison Research S9 does for the Amadeus Quartet or Leonard Bernstein it also does for Louis Armstrong, Ella Fitzgerald, Frank Sinatra, Sonny Rollins, John Coltrane . . . It brings the performances back alive.
Why bother with three phono preamps most of us can’t afford? For the same reason the enthusiast automobile magazines cover the newest Ferraris and Lamborghinis: just reading about them is fun.

All three of these expensive phono preamps share certain sonic attributes not found in less costly, less ambitious units: all are free of “electronica” and glare. Their edge definition of aural images is smoothly and naturally delineated. All three produce music on a grand, effortless scale. All, to varying degrees, are without easily identifiable sonic signatures, while reproducing harmonically and physically identifiable individual instruments into the deepest recesses of the soundstage. And each one let me easily suspend my disbelief and experience reproduced music as if I were hearing it live.

Compare with any phono preamp costing $1000–$2000 and, good as such models can be, you’ll immediately hear the scale of their sonic pictures diminish in all dimensions. Individual instruments will begin to smear together the farther back you listen. Dynamics will diminish at both ends of the scale, harmonic structures will start to unravel, and edges will blur. Your wide-eyed amazement at the pricier players’ sound will turn to a disappointed grimace.

Using an excerpt of a sonically spectacular reissue of Donald Johanos and the Dallas Symphony’s justly renowned 1967 recording of Rachmaninoff’s Symphonic Dances (45rpm LPs, Vox Turnabout/Analogue Productions AP 54145), recorded by David Hanssens using Benchmark’s ADC 1 A/D converter, as played through all three preamps, as well as through the Boulder 2008 and a reasonably priced, well-engineered solid-state unit. I used these files for comparisons in my evaluations here, and played them for others without identifying which preamp was which. When the recording of the perfectly fine, relatively inexpensive solid-state phono preamp came up, their faces fell.

While there are some genuine bargains in high-end audio, as there are in wines and automobiles, my mother’s old adage still holds: “You pay, you get.” With these three, you pay a lot and you get a lot.

**Abbingdon Music Research PH-77 Reference Class Phono Equaliser**

Beneath the gorgeous chassis of Abbingdon Music Research’s tubed PH-77 Reference Class Phono Equaliser ($11,995) is a true dual-mono phono preamplifier with unprecedented, microprocessor-controlled features. Its limitless flexibility includes 22 phono equalization curves in addition to RIAA, eight gain settings, from 30 to 72dB, and 32 loading options each for moving-magnet and moving-coil cartridges—all selectable at the push of a series of touch-sensitive buttons, either on the front panel or on the remote control. The generously sized fluorescent panel announces the setting choices, including cartridge brand.

**Cartridge brand?** Yes. You can choose from a long list that ranges from the well-known (Lyra, Shelter, Shure, etc.) to the exotic (Allaerts, 47 Labs, SPJ). Also aboard is a 24-bit/96kHz A/D converter, accessible via a USB port on the rear chassis.

The zero-negative-feedback circuit, which operates in pure, single-ended class-A, utilizes a hybrid first gain stage, half of which was adapted from UK designed “Advanced Gamma Tracking Array” (AGATA) preamplifiers, with the second half comprised of NOS Mullard ECC81/I2AT7 tubes, in a direct-coupled, zero-feedback configuration. 26 silver-foil coupling caps perform pure passive RC equalization (including RIAA). The second gain stage uses NOS Philips 5687WB tubes both for gain and to produce a low output impedance (<200 ohms). The PH-77 preserves absolute polarity at all gain and equalization settings.

According to an AMR press release, the PH-77’s first gain stage is an adaption of circuitry of extremely low noise that’s used in AGATA quantum-particle research. The result is difficult to believe: a claimed level of input noise of –145dBV (0.056µV). The dual-mono power supply includes choke filtering, and tube rectification via a pair of NOS (new old stock) EZ80 tubes.

**Curve Ball:** The addition of various EQ curves is both useful and fraught with the potential for abuse. Most American companies adopted the RIAA curve in the mid-1950s, and by 1958 and the advent of stereo, almost all other US and European labels had followed suit. But before that, different record labels used various curves of their own.

For instance, AMR’s own website claims that the original Mercury Living Presence series used Decca/London’s 69s (stereo) and 69r (mono) curves. Yet the jacket of my original copy of Antal Dorati and the London Symphony performing Prokofiev’s *The
Love for Three Oranges Suite (LP, Mercury Living Presence SR 90006, only the label's sixth stereo release) says that the record "should be played according to the RIAA standard"—as do all of the other Mercurys in my collection, both US and UK pressings. Ditto UK-pressed Londons. AMR also claims that "original Miles Davis and Dave Brubeck" LPs on Columbia Records used Columbia's own early curve—yet Miles Davis didn't begin to record for Columbia until late October 1955 (his first album for the label, 'Round About Midnight, wasn't released until 1957), and by then Columbia had already switched to the RIAA curve.

How do I know? I contacted veteran Columbia mastering engineer Mark Wilder, who thought I was correct, but to be sure, he contacted some of the really veteran Columbia mastering engineers—those who'd been around in 1955. They confirmed, some with more certainty than others, that Columbia had made the switch to RIAA on all their lathes by 1955.

Be my guest and use the PH-77's choices of curve as an equalizer to make your favorite records sound as you wish, but unless you have a large collection of pre-1955 monophonic LPs and/or 78s, most of the time you'll use—or should use—the RIAA setting (or the RIAA with the Neumann constant, which John Atkinson doesn't like; or the RIAA DMM setting, which I'd never heard of).

Four Inputs, Some Waiting: The AMR PH-77 has a single Direct input and three switchable ones. You can use either configuration, but going from Direct to switchable requires shutting the unit completely off—and you're advised to not plug simultaneously into both. While the three switchable inputs will offer great convenience for some, there was a sonic price to be paid in terms of transparency, three-dimensionality, and harmonic integrity compared to Direct. Therefore, I did all of my listening through the Direct input. You can

have convenience or optimized sound quality, but you can't have both at the same time.

Whatever your desires in loading, gain, and phono EQ, they're but a button-press or two away, once you've mastered the hierarchy. You can also custom-load your cartridge with plug-in resistors, if the built-in values don't suit it. Output is either via single-ended RCA or "convenience" XLR (ie, the single-ended output is available on an XLR but there is not an actual balanced output).

**Sweet Sound!** I can't vouch for that -145dB noise spec—John Atkinson will be writing a Measurements follow-up in a future issue—but I can say that the PH-77 was remarkably quiet, even through its higher gain settings. In fact, it was subjectively just about as quiet as the solid-state phono preamps reviewed here. Quiet musical passages unfolded against dead-black silence. With nothing on the turntable and my ear pressed to a tweeter, I heard only a faint, smooth hiss at my normal volume level.

The PH-77 produced the easy musical flow and harmonic richness and delicacy that only tube amplification seems to offer, ramped up a few notches with the addition of tube rectification. Those who relish tubes' sense of unimpeded musical flow will revel in the PH-77's liquidity and continuousness. While rich and full, instrumental textures were not too ripe or romanticized. Attacks were reasonably fast and properly sharp, yet supple. Cymbals sizzled nicely, and kick drums had both solid body and convincing physical definition. Acoustic and electric bass lines unfurled with their rhythmic and harmonic structures intact, though the PH-77's character in the bottom end was more suited to the acoustic instrument. Unlike some tubed phono preamps, the PH-77 completely avoided the combination of rhythmic sluggishness and loss of bottom-end definition with exaggerated image size and lack of control.

The AMR's overall tonality was subjectively linear, and free of the warm lumps on bottom or curtailed highs some listeners associate with tubes. Instrumental harmonic structures were vividly painted with a full palette of colors. Well-recorded massed strings had a realistic golden sheen, with more than enough detail and bite to satisfy, while brass sparkled with metallic intensity instead of descending into velvety romanticism.

Were you to have heard through the PH-77 my 3fss pressing of Falla's Nights in the Gardens of Spain backed with Rodrigo's Concierto de Aranjuez, with Ataulfo Argenta conducting the National Orchestra of Spain (LP, London CS 6046), you'd surely have blurted "I'll take it!" That's how richly and delicately drawn, in three dimensions, were the elements of the orchestra, free of electronic artifacts, on a wide, deep soundstage against a black backdrop pierced by Narciso Yepes's precisely rendered classical guitar. And I could go from those recordings, of great delicacy and beauty, to the new Experience Hendrix/Sony Legacy AAA Jimi Hendrix reissues and not feel seriously shortchanged by the PH-77's rendering of rock music.

Still, if your musical diet consists mostly of rock, and amplified music in
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aR2p-T Adept Response

"Folks this is the real deal here. So if you have a high resolution system and want to elevate it just that much further then step right up. The aR2p-T is one of the champions at low level retrieval and should help improve overall performance within your existing system. The increase in clarity and natural sounding timbre with both music and vocals was very addictive."

Enjoy the Music.com - Anthony Nicosia - Dec '09

aR2-T Adept Response

"Overall articulation with this cable in place is unparalleled in my experience, yet the sense of life, of body, of breathing, is almost magical. Extension at both frequency extremes seems limitless. And talk about quiet, music is free to emanate from the darkest, most unobtrusive background I've yet heard."

Positive Feedback Online 2009 Writer's Choice Award
Greg Weaver, Senior Editor - Nov '09

aR6-T Adept Response

"The insertion of the aR6T brought a new, dance-like, joyful aliveness to the recording (a slice of what I had heard at Ozawa Hall), with a natural flow of notes into a wider and deeper soundstage than I ever thought possible in my system. With the aR6T, everything on recordings is just more vital, more musically engaging and inviting. As such, it is indispensable."

StereoTimes.com - Nelson Brill - Sept '09

aR8 UK Adept Response

"No product is perfect, but the aR8 gets damn close. It's strange, if a change this large is laid at the door of a CD player, preamp or power amp, few quibble. Even saying changing the interconnect cables produces this big a difference might be accepted with scant question, but to attribute these sort of improvements to a power product is always viewed quizzically. The fact remains that the Audience adeptResponse aR8 makes a big, important difference to the sound, every bit in line with three grand upgrades to electronics further up the food chain. So, set aside your preconceptions and prejudices and listen."

HiFi+ - Alan Sitcom - Editor - Nov '09 issue 69
general, I think you’d be better off elsewhere. But for jazz and classical? Play some tracks from some choice new reissues—say, The Nat King Cole Story (45rpm LPs, Capitol/Analogue Productions APP-SWCL 1613), or Johnny Hartmann’s I Just Dropped By to Say Hello (LP, Impulse/ORG 027)—and you won’t need any convincing.

The PH-77 is a sweet, tonally well-balanced, quiet performer that produced a large, authoritative sonic picture packed with honest detail. Its weakest suit was its inability to produce full macrodynamic expression. While it was good in that regard, it was noticeably less fully expressed than through the other phono preamps surveyed here, though I noticed the difference only in direct comparisons, and because my Wilson MAXX 3 speakers exude dynamic explosiveness.

The PH-77’s A/D converter is a nice convenience if you are wanting to rip your LPs, and while 24/96 doesn’t make much sense if you’re burning 16/44.1 CD-Rs, it makes complete sense if you’re storing full-resolution files on a music server like the Sooloos—as I found out.

I hope AMR can introduce a less expensive version of the PH-77 with only a single, direct input—I think most serious listeners won’t be using the switchable inputs of this superlative-sounding phono preamp.

**Boulder Amplifiers 1008 phono preamplifier**

Your $12,000 can get you the tubed AMR PH-77 or the new solid-state Boulder 1008. Though the two models are built with equal care and perform with equal refinement, they couldn’t have sounded more different.

While even at $12,000 the single-chassis dual-mono 1008 costs only about a third as much as the dual-chassis 2008 ($34,000), its build quality, like that of all Boulder gear, is impeccable. Even people who don’t like Boulder’s house sound will grant them that. The fully balanced 1008 has XLR inputs and outputs. Boulder can supply properly configured single-ended adapters if needed (I did, for the input connection) but for optimum performance, the company suggests rewiring your tonearm leads with XLR connectors.

The 1008 has two logic-controlled inputs, each with its own configurable, rear-mounted “personality card,” and two outputs, one of which can be used for recording. In addition to RIAA, the 1008 includes the Decca ffrr, Columbia, and EMI curves for “LP records made prior to 1954,” the press release sensibly states. The front panel boats buttons for a 20Hz low-cut filter and a true Mono mode. How Boulder manufactures these buttons requires a full column!

DIP switches mounted on the “personality cards” select between MM (44dB) or MC (70dB) cartridges, but if the 100 ohm MC default resistors don’t meet your needs (they were ideal for mine), setting a different load will require soldering in resistors. With the resistor removed, the MC load is 1k ohm; in MM, the setting is the standard 47k ohms.

I wish I had more space to go into greater detail about the 1008’s circuitry. I’ll just say that it also includes a new, potted, fully discrete 985 op-amp gain stage that provides 6dB greater gain (for a total of 26dB) than the 995 used in the 2008, but with no additional noise.

**Massive Attack!** For comparison’s sake, Boulder also sent along a sample of their 2008 phono preamp ($34,000), which I reviewed in the July 2002 Stereophile (Vol.25 No.7). Immediately obvious was that both the 2008 and 1008 were capable of producing massive dynamic swings well beyond the AMR PH-77’s generally adequate dynamic capabilities.

Once, a manufacturer refused to give me his product to review because I’d liked the Boulder 2008. “Clearly, you like hi-fi and not music,” he said. I was taken aback then, and now, listening again to the 2008, I still don’t understand his remark. The 2008 is as honest- and musical-sounding a solid-state phono preamplifier as you’re going to hear.

Like the 2008, the far less expensive 1008 was neither bright nor etched nor hi-fi sounding—unless the record or the associated equipment was. In fact, the 1008’s basic tonal character was somewhat reserved, slightly soft, and almost on the dark side of neutral, in a stately, burnished sense. The midrange was slightly recessed, certainly in comparison with the AMR, but the top octaves were anything but dry or overetched, and the lower ones were neither over-damped nor too tightly sprung, and thus lacking in suppleness and texture. Image resolution and information retrieval were impressive, though the 2008 can extract even more.

Late one evening I played, at a realistically low level, Shostakovich’s Symphony 12, “The Year 1917,” with Kirill Kondrashin conducting the Leningrad Philharmonic (LP, Melodiya/EMI ASD 2598). It’s a dark, distant, but spectacular recording, and I could “see” into the darkest recesses of the stage, hearing not only each section of the orchestra, but the individual instruments in each, reproduced with clarity, body, texture, and harmonic integrity. It produced a thrill ride as vivid as watching Avatar in 3D IMAX.

The rock-stable, cleanly delineated soundstage produced by either Boulder spread well beyond the outer baffle edges of my speakers. Aural images were tightly compacted, finely drawn and sized, and notably solid, their physical boundaries cleanly rendered but free of etch and edge.

Still, if you savor the AMR PH-77’s liquidity and flow, you might find the Boulder and most other solid-state phono preamps, if not all of them, to...
sound analytical and “electronic.” I didn’t.

Interestingly, direct comparisons revealed that the 1008 produced richer midrange frequencies than the 2008, resulting in a tonal presentation that was more fleshy and harmonically more vivid, though it could at times sound soft and less detailed—as if Boulder’s voicing of the 1008 were in reaction to some of the criticism leveled at the 2008. The 1008 didn’t grip the bottom octaves as tightly as the 2008, but which you’ll prefer in that regard might depend on your system. The 1008’s top end was also somewhat less extended and a bit more soft, though not so much as to mute instrumental attack. If your problem with the 2008 was too much etch, the 1008 might be far more to your liking—but I wouldn’t recommend using it with a cartridge with a similarly restrained top octave, such as the My Sonic Labs.

**ANALOG CORNER**

**IN HEAVY ROTATION**

1. Joni Mitchell, *Court and Spark*, Reprise 180gm LP
2. Acid Mothers Temple, *Are We Experimental?*, Propahse LPs (2)
3. Jimi Hendrix, *Axis: Bold as Love*, Experience Hendrix/Sony/Legacy 180gm LP
4. Bob Thompson, *The Sound of Speed*, Bachus/Sundazed 180gm LP
5. Muddy Waters, *I’m Ready, Columbia/Pure Pleasure 180gm LP
6. Lee Morgan, *Search for the New Land*, Blue Note/Music Matters 180gm 45rpm LPs (2)
10. Michael Brecker, *Pilgrimage*, Heads Up/Mobile Fidelity Sound Lab 180gm LPs (2)

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Eminent EX.

The Boulder 2008’s soundstage was more concisely drawn than the 1008’s, the images on it more finely rendered, the bottom octaves somewhat better controlled, and the macrodynamics somewhat less restrained—but the 1008’s somewhat more bloomy midrange and forgiving top end might make it more appealing to many, especially for one-third the price. At $12,000, dare I call it the more affordable Boulder?

**Vitus Audio MP-P201 Masterpiece Series Phono Preamp**

This massive, two-box beauty from Denmark costs $60,000, and I wish I could tell you it wasn’t really better in most ways than the already outlandishly priced and sonically superb Boulder 2008. I can’t.

No one spends this kind of money on a phono preamp unless its appearance and functionality are commensurate with its sound, and in the MP-P201 they are—even if there’s only the RIAA curve, and no Mono button. However, what will get wealthy enthusiasts to drain $60k from their bank accounts will be the Vitus’s unmistakably astonishing sound. Plug it in, play it, and compare it with whatever you own, and unless you are a confirmed tubeholic, if you’ve got the krone, prepare to shell out. Designer Hans-Ole Vitus claims that this method has already sold more than a few units of his mundanely named product.

The Vitus includes switchable, independently configurable balanced and single-ended inputs and a single balanced output. Pushbuttons select and save input sensitivity (125–500µV for MC) and loading for each input, the name of which can be selected from a list of 10 popular cartridge brands—or, in Text mode, you can enter your own.

Vitus offers a choice of four dealer-installed modules for resistive loading, only one of which can be installed at a time. Each includes 16 different resistances. Two are MC only, and two offer both low impedance loading and 47k ohms, for those who have MC and MM cartridges. No alternate capacitive loadings are offered, but really—how many buyers will use an MM cartridge with a $60,000 phono preamp?

**Oh, no!** In direct comparisons with the Boulder 2008, the Vitus MP-P201 produced more of everything that anyone would want to hear from a solid-state phono preamp—and for twice the price but with considerably less functionality, it had better well! The first late evening I spent with it had me yelling, loudly and often, to no one in particular, “Are you f—ing kidding me?”

Just when I thought the dynamic and spatial potentials of an LP had been fully expressed, just when I thought the resolution of inner detail of the other top contenders I’ve heard had revealed all that was engraved in the grooves of some overly familiar vinyl, the Vitus proved me so wrong. Even casual listeners—as such as my skeptical next-door neighbor, who visits periodically to hear the latest insanity—exclaimed profanely when he heard his requests through the Vitus.

Often, great amplifiers are described as “gripping” and “holding” the loudspeakers. The Vitus MP-P201 did that to the signal coming from the cartridge as no other phono preamp has in my experience. That effect rippled through the signal chain, improving the performance of everything it touched, and finally tightening its grip on the speakers themselves. It wasn’t at all subtle—as a visiting speaker manufacturer heard the other day. Nor did it sound too mechanical or dry or “electronic”—though again, if you primarily value the continuousness and flow of tubes, while you’ll be respectful of what the MP-P201 achieves, you might not be as impressed as I was.

The MP-P201’s dynamic presen-
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*World Radio History*
tation at both ends of the scale was nothing short of ridiculous. Its bass extension, control, and weight were granitic. Its ability to tonally and spatially retrieve and resolve instruments and voices within a narrow frequency band produced a constant barrage of new information from some very familiar recordings.

Unexpected voices and instruments appeared in three-dimensional space from the most familiar recordings. These familiar recordings are almost part of my DNA, so suddenly hearing something completely new and obvious produced many “WTF” moments. Even after having sat mesmerized by that Shostakovich LP through both Boulders, hearing it now through the Vitus MP-P201 was yet another revelation of what's possible from vinyl playback specifically, and from musical reproduction in the home in general. The Vitus drew a line in the sand of its soundstage that produced images of the fronts of orchestras way back in space, with an unprecedented solidity and certainty of location. Every aspect of the spatial picture was equally solid and convincing, including the front-to-back layering of orchestral sections—even though this Melodiya/EMI is a very distant recording.

Nor did such a degree of delineation sound artificial. It sounded as natural as when I hear the New York Philharmonic in Avery Fisher Hall, with imaging, soundstaging, and depth just as easily audible—not as compartmentalized musical workstations, but as part of an organic whole that some skeptics claim doesn't exist when you hear symphonic music live. It does.

The Vitus MP-P201’s speed, transparency, three-dimensionality, frequency extension, rhythmic ability, musical grip, and any other parameter you could name—with the exception of what only tubes can do—took the overall sound to a new, exalted level. That Shostakovitch performance sounded as convincingly “live” as I've ever heard from a recording—except through the Ypsilon VPS-100 tubed phono preamp ($27,700), which I reviewed in my August 2009 column.

If you can look yourself in the eye and spend $60,000 on a phono preamp, you need to hear Vitus Audio's MP-P201. You need to hear it even if you haven't got the $60k—just so you know what awaits you, should you strike it rich.

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www.Stereophile.com, July 2010
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Put us to the test!

When we make the bold claim above, we do not expect you to take our word for it. Instead, we would prefer if you put us to the test, by auditioning one of the YG Acoustics speaker lines:

Anat Reference II – the best loudspeaker on Earth
Kipod – amazing performance, compact size
Carmel – entry into ultra-high-end

To this end, we have embarked on the YG Acoustics Comparison Tour – a series of comparative-listening events, in which our speakers are put head-to-head against highly-regarded competitors.

Our mission is to give you a chance to audition YG Acoustics speakers and experience for yourself how they compare. Not through the opinions of reviewers or others, helpful as they may be. Instead, your own ears are the only judge.
**Which speakers are compared?**

The comparative-listening events feature only competitors that are highly regarded, well-reviewed, and cost significantly more than the specific YG Acoustics speaker.

For instance, on the current tour, the YG Acoustics Carmel (MSRP $18,000) faces a competitor with significant press attention and rave reviews, with an MSRP of $27,000.

**How is the comparison conducted?**

The discerning audiophiles who attend YG Acoustics events expect a balanced comparison. To that end we strictly adhere to the following rules:

- Both speakers use the exact same system in the same room.
- Both speakers are moved in and out of the same exact position, which is clearly marked.
- The same program material is used for both speakers.
- The volume level is precisely matched.
- The competitor is measured before the events at the state-of-the-art YG Acoustics lab, to ensure that it is functioning properly and that its graphs match those in its magazine reviews.
- The competitor is allowed to attend and verify that their speaker is adequately represented.
- At the end of the event, participants fill out an anonymous survey, with their vote and ideas for improvement.

**Schedule of Events**

- **20-Feb-2010**, conducted by Audio Limits at the YG Acoustics showroom in Arvada, CO. Completed – vote tally: 15 for YG Acoustics Carmel, 0 for competitor, 1 tied.
- **13-Mar-2010**, at GTT Audio in Long Valley, NJ. Completed – vote tally: 15 for YG Acoustics Carmel, 0 for competitor, 0 tied.
- **2-Apr-2010**, at HiFi Live in Alpine, UT. Completed – vote tally: 7 for YG Acoustics Carmel, 0 for competitor, 0 tied.
- **22-May-2010**, at Advanced Home Theater in Plano, TX. By the time of publication, this event will have been completed. Please see www.yg-acoustics.com for the vote results.
- **11-Jun-10 through 13-Jun-10**, during the Capital Audiofest in Washington, DC. You are invited!
- For updates and additional future events please see www.yg-acoustics.com.

**Summary**

So, are we conducting these events to claim that the competition makes bad speakers? No—we only select high-quality competitors, otherwise the comparison would be meaningless. We are, however, conducting these events to prove to you, using your own ears, that YG Acoustics indeed manufactures the best loudspeaker on Earth.
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Finally, the Fi Preamplifier

At our best, audiophiles are the selfless and generous custodians of a thousand small libraries, keeping alive not only music's greatest recorded moments but the art of listening itself. At our worst, we are self-absorbed, supernannuated rich kids, locked in an endless turd-hurl over who has the best toys.

Sanctimonious though it sounds, I prefer things that, by whatever method, allow me the luxury of the former, sunnier view of myself. The newest product from Fi is one of those.

It is also, as far as I can tell, the first Fi to come with an instruction sheet. "You do have to know which tube goes in which socket," says designer and builder Don Garber, "and you've got to know what the switches are for."

He apologizes for the scant labeling on the metalwork: the result of a change in suppliers, itself occasioned by the steady erosion of manufacturing jobs in Garber's beloved Brooklyn. "The company that made silk screens for me went belly up a little over a year ago," he tells me. "I thought I'd found a new one, and I had them do the screen for the back panel, which came out well. Then they folded."

The real subject of our conversation is the Fi 2b, Garber's long-awaited successor to the simply-named Fi Preamplifier, a wildly loved and widely sought product. (I've turned down more than one generous offer for my own original.) In the 14 years since the Fi Preamp hit the bespoke audio scene of the 1990s, Garber experimented with various changes, some of which—onboard moving-coil transformers and an all-tube power supply among them—made it into various prototypes. But the 2b is the Fi Preamplifier's first commercially available replacement.

The earlier pre was based on an original circuit by the late Nobu Shishido, in which all voltage gain was provided by four 6DJ8 dual-triode tubes. In each channel's moving-magnet phono stage, the two halves of a single 6DJ8 were arranged plate-to-grid, followed by a passive RIAA network. The line-stage tubes were configured in series-regulated, push-pull (SRPP) fashion, to keep the output impedance as low as possible. The Preamplifier's dual-mono outboard power supply used tubes to regulate the rail voltage—after rectification by a pair of solid-state diodes—and provided a trim pot for maintaining a steady, highish rail. (Three houses and 14 years later, I've virtually never had to adjust mine at all.)

Yet the soul of the Fi Preamplifier was in its construction—or, more specifically, in its circuit layout, which some colleagues describe as one of Garber's greatest talents. (Among the nicest-sounding amplifiers to come from Wavelength Audio's Gordon Rankin was the Baby Ongaku 2A3 monoblock he created for Issue 9 of Sound Practices magazine in 1995; when it came time to lay out the circuit, SP contributor Frank Reps turned to Don Garber.)

Just as important, the Fi Preamplifier defied convention by looking unlike anything else on the market. Both the preamp and its outboard power supply measured a little less than 9" square, viewed from above, and instead of stuffing the parts into a metal box of the usual sort, Garber mounted everything on a series of rigid aluminum tiers, for optimal wire paths (the Fi was a star-ground design) and good looks.

As Garber describes it, the brand-new Fi 2b—priced at $8200 for the full line-plus-MC-phono version that I have in hand—starts where the original left off, then goes in a slightly different direction.

The 2b's gain stages are similar to those of the original Fi Preamplifier, although the new model comes with Electro-Harmonix 6922 dual triodes: functional twins of the 6DJ8. "Exotic NOS tubes? I've just never gone there," Garber says.

But the new preamp marks the first time he's used certain other premium parts, in places where he's convinced they make a difference in the sound. Among the more expensive bits are Vishay nude resistors—"They come as close to disappearing as anything," Garber says—and the Teflon and tin-foil V-Caps, from VH Audio. I was surprised to hear of the latter, given Garber's long-standing skepticism about the audible differences among designer capacitors, not to mention his famous dislike of tedious phone conversations about same. But his enthusiasm for V-Caps is real: "They're made by a guy called Chris VenHaus," he says, "and I think it's all straightforward and honest, the way Chris describes his cap-making process."

Don Garber also remained keen to have a pair of onboard step-up transformers for MC phono gain, so he spent a considerable amount of time over the past few years just listening to all the commercial units available. He chose the split-primary HM-3 from Hashimoto Electric of Japan, implemented in the Fi 2b with switch-selectable inputs for low impedance (40x gain) and high impedance (20x gain). As a bonus, the
LISTENING

Hashimoto cans are finished in a gorgeous shade of hammertone green that looks more vintage than vintage.

Arguably the greatest circuit distinctions between the old and new Fi preamps are found in the 2b's outboard power supply. Incoming AC is still regulated by a pair of silicon diodes—"a tube would not make a difference," Garber says—and still conditioned by a 6AV5GA series regulator and other tubes. "I've tried using regulated power supplies in amps, but, to me, it tends to dry out the sound," he says; "whereas, in a preamp, it appears to do the opposite." But Garber says that the new design, "simpler and more straightforward than the older one," was the subject of many hours of his work in refining the circuit layout for a lower noise floor.

Another distinction: In the new version, only a single umbilical carries power from the supply to the preamplifier. Garber explains: "On the old one, I was trying to keep everything as dual-mono as I could—and then I found it didn't make a difference." As it turns out, simplicity had the greater, and better, influence on the sound.

Finally, although the 2b retains the layered look of Fi's earlier preamp (and a few Fi amplifiers), certain visual elements have changed somewhat. Input jacks, which were on the top surface of the original, now share the rear panel with the output jacks. The plastic control knobs of the first samples and the smooth metal pillbox knobs of interim preamps have given way to three brass control gears: a distinctive touch. But the biggest visual change is the new model's comparative bigness. While the size of the outboard power supply hasn't changed, the preamp itself now measures a little over 10" square. Especially when placed side by side, the new combination looks righter to me.

All right, then—what of it?

As his friends surely know, Don Garber is articulate and well versed in a number of areas, including fine art (he also enjoys success as a painter), literature, films, and, of course, music. Just don't ask him to wax poetic about the amps and preamps he constructs for his grateful clientele. "I have the sales charisma of a wet paper bag, or so said Harvey Rosenberg a number of years ago." Garber pauses and chuckles at the memory—imagine Donald Sutherland saying Uh-uh and you'll have an idea what that sounds like—then finishes by saying, dryly but not uncharitably, "Coming from Harvey, I regarded this as a compliment. I told Harvey that and, after a longish pause, we both had a good laugh."

I've had the pleasure of reviewing a number of Fi products, yet I can't recall Garber saying a thing about the sound of any of them, let alone enthusing over them. Thus I couldn't help being impressed when he said, of the Fi 2b, "I like the sound." That, I suppose, was as close to channeling Muhammad Ali and Yngwie Malmsteen as the thoughtful and understated Mr. Garber will ever get.

After the Fi 2b preamp was run in and warmed up, during a week when my system appeared to be in a very good state of tune, I set about listening to Chopin's Ballade 4 in f, played by Sviatoslav Richter, recorded live during an early-1960s tour of Italy (mono LP, Deutsche Grammophon LPM 18849).
What's special about this recording is its musicality: Though Richter was a player of extraordinary skill—and this Ballade is one of the most technically challenging pieces in the canon—his technique remained invisible throughout. In Richter's hands, the Ballade simply made sense, simply worked as a moving piece of music, better than in any other modern recording with which I am familiar.

And the music itself holds a special place in my life. Long ago, as I watched TV in the lounge of a college dorm, a commercial came on for some or another fancy perfume. The visuals were the usual crazy shit—an intentionally grainy, washed-out, black-and-white film of an attractive woman speeding through the countryside in an old-style roadster—but the music sank its claws into my memory, more or less for good. I set about trying to learn what it was, using the unpromising method of humming the melody at strangers and asking if they knew it. I struck paydirt in the best possible place—a quaint old 20th-century record store—and went home with a Deutsche Grammophon LP containing the Ballade in f. In the following weeks I just about wore the groove clear through to the other side—and to this day, when I hear that piece under the best listening conditions, I still see in my mind that peripatetic blonde.

The Fi 2b's great strength was that it allowed such a thing to be readily apparent.

Prospective buyers will be happy to know: The Fi 2b also sounded very good!

In the same sense that most hobbyists of my generation can point to the first time they heard spatial depth from a stereo pair of modern loudspeakers, or the first time they experienced an approximation of lifelike musical drama and dynamics from a single-ended-triode amplifier, I remember the first time I realized that some electronics were capable of sounding bigger than others. It was, in fact, the first time I heard the original Fi Preamplifier in my system. Before that, I'd never even suspected that scale was something I could have more or less of in my playback gear. Since then, of course, I've consistently wanted more. The 2b gave it.

Through the Fi 2b, musical detail was fine: as abundant and naturally realistic as it gets. Before putting the new Fi in my system, I never noticed Tony Rice's unmistakable speaking voice encouraging fellow guitarist Peter Rowan during the latter's solo in the middle section of their version of "Midnight Moonlight," from the album Quartet (CD/AIFF, Rounder 610579). Also on that good album, I was impressed with the greater-than-usual sense of humanness the Fi seemed to bring to the quartet's reworking of "The Walls of Time," wherein Sharon Gilchrist's mandolin chop had an attitude that no machine could match, and the string-bass playing of virtuosa Bryn Davies—daughter of LAST founder Walter Davies, of course—simply swung.

How did the 2b compare with the Shindo Masseto I've owned and used for exactly three years, alongside my original Fi? The huge-sounding Shindo is the more obviously tubeish device, with a richer, slightly darker character overall. Remarkably, the 2b had even greater scale than the original; just as remarkably,
the Masseto is slightly bigger still. That said, the Fi 2b forges the heavier, more timbrally saturated sound of the Shindo for a more open sort of clarity and, almost certainly, greater degrees of timbral neutrality and textural cleanliness.

It's also worth noting that the 2b was a delight to use. Its MC input switch came in handy whenever I wanted to swap between my low-output Ortofon SPU and my high-output EMT OFD 25 mono cartridge. (The latter sounded extremely nice with the Fi 2b in its high-impedance MC setting; although the very expensive Hommage T1 outboard transformer could wring still more color and juice from the EMT, the Hashimoto wasn't far behind.) Unlike my Shindo, the Fi's mono switch worked with every input. The detented control had both a precise, positive feel and a satisfyingly wide range of fine adjustment. And, with the exception of a minor glitch in which excess downward pressure on the volume gear momentarily muted the phono output—easily remedied by bending one switch contact out of the way of another—the Fi 2b behaved humlessly, noiselessly, and consistently well.

The sound of the Fi 2b preamp was like a Schubert piano trio: logical, perfect, well balanced, apparently immortal, and glowing with beauty of the truthful sort. Like all other Shindo preamps and amps that I've heard, the Masseto is like 20th-century American poetry at its best: The sound contains as much meaning as the notes/words themselves, and every performance is shot through with the kind of random unfamiliarity with Canadian currency, and one cab driver who seized on my memory, and despite the cold winds, Montreal was its enduringly fashionable and food-friendly self.

During the show, John, Stephen, Robert, and I submitted to the usual "Ask the Editors" panel: typically my least favorite part of any show, given that I'm not keen on public speaking. But this was the best one yet, completely lacking in antagonism, and characterized by intelligent and interesting questions. Such as (I paraphrase): Do you think Stereophile should devote more attention to vintage audio products? Remarkably, just a week or so later, the same question came up in the "Critics Corner" of AudioAsylum.com. And again, within the past week, the topic was raised in a group e-mail among some of Stereophile's writers.

Unsurprisingly, among that last group there is no unanimity of opinion. Perhaps just as unsurprisingly, I'm very much a vintage audio fan (although I think it would be unwise for a mainstream magazine with limited editorial space to lavish too much attention on any subgenre). I own a number of vintage components myself, some of which—my Thorens TD 124 turntable and Quad ESL loudspeakers in particular—I use regularly, simply because I prefer them to most of their modern counterparts.

If, in fact, one were to include in the genre NOS parts (all of the tubes and about half of the passive components in my Shindo preamp and mono amplifiers), reissues (the EMT 997 tonearm), and current-production designs that haven't changed in 40 or more years (several stereo and mono pickup heads from Ortofon and EMT), then the word vintage could be applied to most of the items in my reference system. Which, incidentally, sounds wonderful.

But there isn't as big a gap between vintage and new hardware as some appear to think. Ignoring for the moment digital sources, class-D amplifiers, distributed-mode loudspeakers, and various refinements made possible by such recent materials as Sorbothane and carbon fiber, it seems to me that audio products haven't changed as much as have audio people. And of the latter, it's the consumers who've changed most of all (although the marketers are never far behind). What has changed is the apparent willingness of consumers to spend considerable money, endure considerable inconvenience, and devote considerable floor space to domestic audio gear. Of course the engineers of 50 years ago could have made a phono preamplifier, the construction of which would require nearly a week of workdays for resistor-matching alone. Or a turntable with a main bearing that's machined to within a micron's accuracy. Or a single-ended-triode amp with a large enough output transformer to resist saturation all the way down to 30Hz. Or a 400-lb speaker with reasonably uncolored, wide-range sound. But no one back then imagined that consumers would ever tolerate, let alone want, such things.

In the years since Quad ESLs and Marantz Model 8s were available new, people's imaginations have expanded to include a whole lot of nutty ideas. Today, the average fan of perfectionist audio wouldn't look twice at an amplifier with a price under four figures, any more than the average fan of sci-fi adventure films would consider seeing a movie that was made for less than $30 million. The difference is, there's enough of the latter consumers that they don't bear the financial burden, $4 Cokes and $5 bags of M&Ms notwithstanding.

Vintage audio isn't all about squawky things with no bass and no treble and a constant wash of background noise, any more than contemporary audio is all about plasticky-sounding trophy systems designed around shi like The Sheffield Track Record and the Casper soundtrack. Minds, like taverns but unlike circuits, work only when open, so do try everything that comes your way: You needn't wait to hear what we or anyone else thinks about it before you do.

3 I'm always amused when people express the idea that the Linn LP12—or whatever other contemporary product—was the first real high-end record player, by dint of its (admittedly) high-precision build. Anyone who would say such a thing has apparently never examined the main bearing of a Thorens TD 124.

2 You can find our live and almost-live Show coverage at http://blog.stereophile.com/su2010/.

O, Canada
A few weeks ago as I write this, John Atkinson, Stephen Mejias, Robert Deutsch, Keith Pray, and I represented Stereophile at the Salon Son et Image: an enduringly interesting and well-run home-entertainment show in downtown Montreal. From my first hour at the sprawling Hilton Bonaventure—an impromptu bar-food fest shared by most of the above, along with Simaudio's Lionel Goodfield, Dynaudio's Michael Manousselis, DeVore Fidelity's John DeVore, Tone Imports' Jonathan Halpern, and Ayre Acoustics' Steve Silberman—to my last, I had a splendid time. It was also the least snowy SSI in memory, and despite the cold winds, and one cab driver who seized on my unfamiliarity with Canadian currency and stole $10 from me, Montreal was its enduringly fashionable and food-friendly self.

LISTENING

Aside from the full-Monty Fi 2b, with the step-up transformers and the instruction sheet, Don Garber also offered an MM-only version without step-up transformers ($7600), and a line-only version ($7000). Thanks to the current state of the art of computer-based digital audio replay, I can rest assured knowing that even those who settle for the latter will still hear what's so special about this thing.

"This is the best I can do for a preamp, at the moment," Garber told me. "Years from now, who knows?"
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**Stello**

**Ai500** Integrated Amplifier + D/A Converter
The debate over which audio component is most important in determining the quality of a system's sound is one that has been with us for decades. Recently, it came up in a conversation I had during a visit to a Manhattan high-end shop, when I was told about a discussion on the topic by Ivor Tiefenbrun (of Linn) and David Wilson (of Wilson Audio Specialties). You don't have to be a seasoned audiophile to predict their respective positions, but when I was pressed to take a stand, I paused.

Few will argue that the preamplifier and/or amplifier is the most critical component. I take that as tacit acceptance that any competent electronics design, whether tube or solid-state, discrete or chip-based, can provide a quality of amplification sufficient to discern not only tunes and words, but harmonic detail and spatial imaging. Amplification using any of these technologies is capable of anything from decent to spectacular performance, depending on the requisite price, necessary weight, and available power. Compare a good $500–$1000 integrated amplifier with a preamp and power amp at ten times the price, both played at output levels that don't tax the integrated, and I'll bet that the audible differences, though real, will nonetheless be small in terms of letting us follow the music without obtrusive distortion, noise, or loss. I'm not talking about toys, or the cheap'n'cheerful devices sold in the general market, but about genuine high-fidelity components of the sort that Stereophile has reviewed throughout its history.

Tiefenbrun and Wilson advocated, respectively, the source and the speakers as being of primary importance. Back when the source was presumed to be a turntable, that simplified the debate to a choice between mechanical transducers. But these days, the turntable has effectively been replaced by almost purely electronic sources: digital disc players, Apple iPods and their competitors, and streamed music.

Today's most ubiquitous source, the iPod, suffers from the (usually) limited bandwidth of the recordings played on it, but its small size gives it the portability underlying its immense success. As with streamed music, the performance limits of the source component tend to be defined by the limitations of the recordings themselves, not of the technology or the hardware.

Digital discs—CD, DVD-Audio, SACD, etc.—contain not only the digitized program content but also the clock and flag information needed to properly decode and accurately translate the data into analog signals. In effect, the performance is less dependent on the mechanical design of the player and more on a function of the electronics. For most players, these electronics consist of devices selected from the offerings of a small number of chipmakers, and many players include similar technology or share major components, including transports and circuit boards; at the egregious extreme, some are simply clones of other models. I will posit that, as in the amp comparison described above, performance differences among these players will be real but small.

Contrast both of these thought experiments with the comparison of a decent $500–$1000/pair loudspeaker with one costing 10 times as much, both set up and listened to in an acoustically hospitable environment. Here the differences, in terms of bass extension and midrange clarity—and possibly other parameters, if power/level distinctions are permitted—would be all too obvious.

So I think the debate is over, especially in the context of contemporary multichannel systems. This doesn't mean that you can just buy a player and receiver from Walmart and spend the rest of your budget on speakers. It does mean that you need to invest in speakers, and pay attention to speaker placements and room acoustics, in order to appreciate the differences among amplifiers and source components. It also means that you need to have amplification appropriate to your speakers and listening preferences.

Finally, it means that an assessment of the performance of electronics can no longer rely on price as a crutch or bias. There are high-value products whose performance makes them compatible with otherwise "high-end" systems. On the other hand, incorporating generic components into a more expensive product may now be unavoidable, but we should require that designers add meaningful value by engineering the nongeneric portions to standards beyond the minimal. There is still great opportunity for this.

Cambridge Audio Azur 650BD universal Blu-ray player
Cambridge Audio's new Azur 650BD is a prime example of a high-performing player with a remarkable array of features in a smart package at a price ($699) that would have seemed stunningly low only a little while ago (see Sidebar “Cambridge & MediaTek”). I examine those features below, but the 650BD looks impressive as well. Its front panel is uncluttered: the Standby/On button is to the left of the centrally stacked disk tray and display, and the five transport buttons are to the right. The black-anodized finish of my review sample made the dark cover of the front USB port nearly invisible, as was the IR sensor. The top of the chassis bears a 3D representation of the Cambridge logo. The 650BD is compact, with gentle radiuses of the chassis cover and front panel edges, and sits on four nicely squishy feet that give...
The Sweet Spot

Every audiophile understands the term - that confluence of conditions that elicits the best performance, whether it's a particular listening position or components that complement each other sonically. We work to deliver as much sweet spot as possible by offering a combination of characteristics that work in harmony to reliably deliver the best sound.

This approach operates down to the most basic level, the character of individual gain devices operating in an environment of varying voltages, currents and temperatures. Finding the Sweet Spot depends on selecting, adjusting and balancing these conditions for each part.

Equally important is knowing the Sweet Spot when you hear it – it's not always simply the lowest measured distortion. Nelson has written an article on the relevance of the Sweet Spot in amplifier design and some of the techniques that get it there. www.passlabs.com
but adequately hefty wand with which
brations. The remote control is a thin
it both stability and isolation from vi-

mations. The remote control is a thin
brations. The remote control is a thin

The rear panel has all the requisite
connectors for the many functions of
this universal player, including lots of
outputs—71-channel analog audio,
 coaxial and optical digital audio,
 component/composite/S-video, and
 HDMI—as well as USB and Ethernet
 ports, an IR emitter input, and an AC
 power input. Considering all the con-
nection options, and that our major
concern here is sound, I concentrated
on the HDMI and 71-channel analog
outputs, and only briefly sampled the
coaX and digital optical outputs. I con-
nected the analog outputs to my Para-
sound P7 preamplifier, as I'd done with
the Oppo BDP-83SE and Lexicon BD-
30 Blu-ray players I reviewed in March.
HDMI output connection was to the
Meridian HD621 HDMI converter. I
also auditioned the Azur 650DB brief-
ly with the Integra DTC-9.8 and Classe
CT-SSP preamplifier-processors.

Setup was simple—the on-screen
menus are much the same as in Oppo's
players, though the color scheme and
wallpaper are all Cambridge. I disabled
Secondary Audio, in order to ensure
full-resolution sound, and defeated
Auto Play Mode to avoid truncation
of the first second or two of the first
track. After I had the player run a quick
check with Cambridge Audio's server
for new firmware, I was good to go.
The Azur 650DB had no prob-
lem playing any disc I fed it. I'm often
amazed at the comments I read about
certain discs causing problems. Most of
the problem discs turn out to be films
on Blu-ray, with their ever-increasing
BD-Live and Java restrictions and con-
trols; I have yet to experience any such
problems with music discs, including
BDs. Second, while the 650BD did
make a very, very quiet tick at the be-

ginning of each track of SACDs, I didn't
find this much of a bother with most re-

cordings; the tick irritated me only with
those discs that lack an inserted break
between tracks. It was most noticeable
with pianist Denis Matsuev's recording
of Rachmaninoff's Rhapsody on a Theme
of Paganini, with Valery Gergiev and the
St. Petersburg Marinsky Theater Or
chestra (SACD, Marinsky MAR0505);
the variations are played without breaks,
but the 650BD inserted a tick at each
transition. However, OEM Mediatek
says that a firmware update will elimi-
nate this problem, as it has with other
Mediatek-based players.

I was happy with the 650BD's sound
via its analog outputs, but, as with the
Oppo BDP-83 I found that using the
HDMI output feeding an external pro-
cessor was better in many ways. Gener-
ally—and I noticed this more easily with
two-channel signals—the midrange was
tofter and warmer, not covered by a
tinge of brightness in the treble, and
the bass was firmer. Corollary to this is
that, because the Cambridge player's
DAC can't process DSD, all analog out-
puts are first converted to PCM. I don't
regard this as significant, though some
will. The other big problem affecting
the 650BD's playback of multichannel
discs is that its bass and channel man-
agement are simply not as flexible or
effective as those of most competent
preamplifier-processors.

Compared to the Oppo BDP-83SE
or the Sony XA-5400ES SACD player,
it was apparent that the Cambridge is
not the last word in detail or smooth-
ness. Nonetheless, the Azur 650BD,
even through its analog outputs, is a
very competent universal player that
would not be embarrassed in almost
any audio system.

Via its HDMI output, the 650BD
sounded superb. It outputs full-band-
width high-definition audio, either
bitstreamed or PCM-converted, and
SACD signals as either DSD or PCM.
Even with A/B comparisons, it was
hard to hear any differences between
it and the other players when all were
used as transports. The solidly con-
structed Sony was mechanically more
secure and silent, but the Cambridge
was actually quieter than either the
Oppo BDP-83 or BDP-83SE, whose
fan noise can be a problem in very
quiet environments. I couldn't reliably
distinguish it from either of the Oppos,
though the Sony did seem a bit mel-
lower. But even this was dependent on
the level of ambient noise and the pro-
cessor to which a player was connected.

Example, the difference was more
often apparent with the Classe CT-SSP
surround-sound processor (see below)
than it was with the Integra DTC-9.8.

Overall, the compact and attractive
Cambridge Audio Azur 650BD, with
its competent circuit design and at-
tention to layout and power supply, is
a player that one can enjoy with any
good system, even one based on speak-
ers and electronics costing many times
as much.

Classe Audio CT-SSP surround-
sound processor

When Classe released its SSP-800
surround-sound processor, I was of-
fered a review sample but decided to
wait for the promised expansion of
the DSP engine to permit decoding of
the high-definition audio codecs from
Dolby and DTS. Little did I suspect

www.Stereophile.com, July 2010

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that that would take so long, or that the SSP-800 would then prove so popular that review samples would be scarce. So when Classé's Dave Nauber offered to send me a CT-SSP ($9000), I happily accepted. I'd waited a long time for this one.

Under its skin, the CT-SSP is a sister to the SSP-800. That skin is a newly engineered chassis intended for rack installation, and matches Classé's Custom Installation line of power amplifiers. To state that the CT-SSP lacks the SSP-800's exquisite appearance slightlys the former's clean, all-business look. Perhaps it's more accurate to say that the CT-SSP is more conservatively dressed than its more stylish sister, with which it shares a common User's Manual.

Hooking up the CT-SSP to my disc players, cable box, display, power amps, and subwoofers was about the same as installing any processor. However, managing the setup was decidedly different. The CT-SSP's nice touchscreen LCD display is entirely sufficient for this, and can be a lifesaver when the video setup is complex or problematic. The menu screens, on the CT-SSP's small or your own big display, are unusual: their large, blocky buttons suit the use of a touchscreen instead of the more common tabular listings. However, it's due to the sophistication and subtlety of these multilevel menus that the CT-SSP functions so well while having a front panel that has only a touchscreen and a single knob—or, alternatively, with a remote control that has a less-than-bewildering array of buttons. The CT-SSP is extremely simple to use, yet lacks nothing in the way of complete control.

Input setup involves assigning an audio and video source to each logical input (up to 20 assignments can be supported), as well as defaults for your audio processing (volume offset, delay, format processing, speaker configuration, and, for analog sources, bypass or digital processing), and entering a name. I set up four input sources, corresponding to the four quick-access buttons on the remote control, to accommodate two disc players via HDMI, one player (or test source) via the multichannel analog-bypass input, and cable TV, also via HDMI. I later added a stereo input for the XLR output of my Sony XA-5400ES SACD player.1

The CT-SSP's speaker configurations (up to six are supported) include settings for speaker distance, level, and size/crossover. The CT-SSP has 10 output channels: the usual 7.1 plus two auxiliary channels that can be used for additional subwoofers, to bi-amp the front left and right channels, or to provide a stereo output to remote speakers. Multiple subwoofer can be configured as one to three mono subs, stereo L/R subs, or discrete L/C/R subs. There is also the option of applying room/speaker equalization with a very effective parametric EQ, but no tools for setting this. Equally sophisticated OSD, video, and CAN-Bus control options exist but are beyond our current concerns.

I connected the CT-SSP to my Paradigm Reference Studio 60 v.3 L/C/R and Studio 20 v.3 surround speakers via my Bryston 9B-SST, five-channel power amplifier and set up the Paradigm Reference Servo-15 and Reference SUB 15 as dual-mono subwoofers. I entered the crossover, distance, delay, level, and trim for each speaker, but for the moment ignored the EQ option.

My Connecticut listening room and speakers have been constants for some years, and have seen the comings and goings of myriad players and processors, but none has made so major and immediate an impact on the sound as the Classé CT-SSP. Typically, the insertion of a new processor is either disappointing, because additional tweaking is required, or it is unprescriptive, because any differences between it and its predecessor are so subtle that they are revealed only by long and intensive listening. However, from the moment I switched on the CT-SSP, the performance of my system was elevated to a level beyond anything previous. I did not expect this.

The major differences between my Connecticut and Manhattan systems have always been in the warmth and smoothness of the transition from the bass to the midrange, the improved clarity of the midrange, and the New York system's almost complete disassociation of its soundstage from its speakers. Of course, that system enjoys a bigger, better room, and comprises far more expensive gear. Inserting the CT-SSP into the Connecticut system went much of the way toward leveling the playing field. The soundstage was moved back just a bit but was also wider and deeper, with both two- and multichannel recordings. Imaging within the soundstage, always a forte with this system, was uncompromised. Claus Peter Flor and the Malaysian Philharmonic's lovely and spacious recording of Josef Suk's Asrael Symphony (SACD, BIS SACD-1776) lacked nothing in detail, tonal balance, or image stability, though it did seem to have a foreshortened soundstage and compressed dynamics with other processors I have reviewed.

In terms of frequency balance, there was always quibbling about the treble of the Paradigm Reference Studio 60 v.3 (certainly as compared with its successor, the v.5), and balancing the outputs of the subwoofer with the rest of the speakers has always been a bugaboo without the intervention of Audyssey's ProEq. Neither was a problem now; the CT-SSP confirmed my decision to keep the v.3s. My test was Christoph von Dohnanyi and the Philadelphia Orchestra's 5.0-channel recording of Mahler's Symphony 6 (SACD, Onine ODE 1084-SD), which has wonderful and subtle treble detail, stringent demands for the convincing reproduction of the low strings, and, of course, the final movement's "blows of fate."

I don't mean to imply that the CT-

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1 In my initial report on the Sony XA-5400ES—see www.stereophile.com/musicintheround/music_in_the_round_36—I said that, at a local audio shop, it wouldn't work with a Classé SSP-800 via HDMI. The Sony at first refused to shake hands with the CT-SSP as well, but a firmware update from Classé provided a complete solution. Users should download the update if they intend to use an XA-5400ES.
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SSP painted over differences among recordings in any way. I recently sampled a number of SACDs released by the Exton label and found that they varied widely in their spatial representations and even their tonal balances. Considering that these were different orchestras recorded in different halls by different engineers, that was as it should be. Further, the difference in presentation and balance between two recordings by pianist Arcadi Volodos, Volodos in Vienna: Live from the Musikverein Wien (2 SACDs, Sony 88697639622), a remarkable concert, and the studio recording Volodos Plays Liszt (SACD, Sony/BMG 87380), could not have been more marked. The latter is all crystalline detail from one end of the keyboard to the other, while the former, bathed in the warmth of Vienna’s Musikverein, consequently sacrifices impact.

But what of room EQ? Although I’ve been a strong advocate of it, and even my use of it in this room, I now felt no pressing need for it. In addition, Classé has expressed the opinion that automatic room EQ is problematic, and that users with a need for it should consult a trained dealer-installer. Nonetheless, I gave it a try. CT-SSP’s PEQ is quite flexible; you can configure up to five filters per channel, each with fully programmable center frequency, magnitude, and Q.

I whipped out my handy-dandy XTZ Room Analyzer and measured each channel’s in-room response. I found low-frequency modes for all but the left and right surrounds. The front L/R speakers had modes at 43 and 46Hz, the center had modes at 41 and 72Hz, and each sub had a large mode at 32Hz. The Q of these modes ranged from 3 to 9, and the magnitudes from 3.5 to 10dB. Considering that I was crossing over from the main speakers to the subs at 40Hz, I was surprised that the improvement was so obvious. Except when called on, the subs simply ceased to exist. Whether with music or with soundtracks, the integration of the subwoofer and speaker outputs seemed to be, at last, perfect.

The Classé CT-SSP is the first surround-sound processor I’ve used that I do not want to remove from this system, but I must—so impressive is its performance that an audition with my big Manhattan rig is a necessity. A report on this will be forthcoming, but regardless of its content or timing, I here give the CT-SSP my unrestricted recommendation. At $9000 it is more expensive than most, but it delivers the goods. So much for my hypothesis that the electronics are rarely a major determinant of overall system performance.

RECORDINGS IN THE ROUND

STRAINSKY: Le Sacre du Printemps, The Firebird
Valery Gergiev, St. Petersburg Mariinsky Theater Orchestra & Ballet
BelAir Classiques BAC441 (BD)

Finally—completely satisfying performances of two of Stravinsky’s three great ballets on Blu-ray! Captured during performances at the Mariinsky Theater in dts HD Master Audio, the sound is powerful and detailed, and despite the orchestra being situated in the pit, there is more than ample shimmer and space. Gergiev is at his best here, standing toe-to-toe with the best available on SACD. His approach is more vigorous than Jansen’s similar pairing (RCO Live 08002), and better recorded than Salonen’s Rite (Deutsche Grammophon 477 619-8). Dorat’s Firebird remains unequalled, but it is more tone poem, and Gergiev’s is more choreographic. Dance, choreography, direction, and video quality are outstanding as well, but the music stands on its own.

BERMEL: Voices
Dust Dances, Thracian Echoes, Elixir, Voices
(Clariinet Concerto)
Derek Bermel, clarinet; Gil Rose, Boston Modern Orchestra Project
BMOp/sound 1008 (SACD/CD)

Wonderful new music, all of it. Dust Dances is charming and jazzy, and reminiscent of Bernstein at his most relaxed. Thracian Echoes is exotic and atmospheric, conjuring up visions of John Fowles’ The Magus. Elixir is a moving and soothing interlude with wonderful antiphonal effects. Voices, a conversational concerto, features a range of interchanges between the composer’s solo clarinet and the orchestra, with an almost raunchily bluesy conclusion. Performances are tip-top, and the sound clear and immediate. One of the most refreshing discs in a while.

MARKUS HAUKE: schlagArtig
Music for percussion by Ishi, Hauke, Wolf, Cage, Xenakis
Markus Hauke, percussion
NCA 60171 (SACD/CD)

Reading the list of composers, one might think this a dully serious event. No way. Each work is distinctive in character and scoring, and none, including Bryan Wolf’s 25-minute “… and our words mingle like tears and our tears whisper like fire ….” ever begins to sound repetitive. In fact, I found schlagArtig highly entertaining, much in the way of the Blue Man Group, but without the pandering to the audience. Add to that the visceral pleasure of a very close-up yet uncongested recording of bangs, bashes, tingles, and sizzles, and this disc is self-recommending to card-carrying audiophiles.

MOZART: Symphonies
Sir Charles Mackerras, Scottish Chamber Orchestra
Linn CKD 355 (2 SACD/CDs)

Two more marvelous sets from Linn Records. The Mozart is the follow-up to Mackerras’s recording of Mozart’s Symphonies 38–41, which I recommended in May 2008. There’s little to add to what I said then: “Linn’s entire SACD series with the SCO is consistently outstanding musically and technically, but they—or anyone—will have difficulty topping this one.” Well, still not toppled, but now equalled.

Pizarro’s essay into Spanish territory is as warm, wonderful, and touching as were his visits to France (Linn CKD 290 and CKD 315). His touch is less delicate than de Larrocha’s, but not so cool as Hamelin’s. In the Granados, this endows his playing with an ineffable sadness and longing. In the Albéniz, that is melded with charm and more than a few smiles. Beautiful music, beautiful playing, beautiful recording.

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pianists
Renee Rosnes
and Bill Charlap
record a
*Double Portrait.*

"To have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer..." For a late-night set at the Village Vanguard or a duo piano record?

C'mon! How hard can it be to make a record with your spouse? Spending long hours in a confined space making art together, both of you playing the same instrument, swapping leads, supporting each other's every move with love, admiration, and infinite patience. A piece o' devil's food cake, right?

To hear Bill Charlap and Renee Rosnes tell it, it's all about the *chemistry.* Is that the chemistry where dead tissue is reanimated and runs amok over the countryside? Or the chemistry in which two pianos intertwine in instinctual ways that could grow only from living under the same roof and listening to each other's playing, day in and day out?

Despite leading questions and much prodding for juicy details of late-night screaming fits or in-studio meltdowns, Bill Charlap and Renee Rosnes swear
that making their new record, Double Portrait, which features nothing but the two of them at their pianos, was an experience so placid that, at one point, the word relaxing was being tossed around. "Hearing it back, it's one of my favorite albums that I've ever made half of," Charlap says. "I love listening to our chemistry. And I do find how much I appreciate Renee's artistry. I've played a lot of two-pianos, but [with] no one with more chemistry than [with] Renee. And more musicianship. Always music first. There's nothing that calls attention to the technique of making music."

So you never wanted to go back to the hotel at night and hit her in the head?

He pauses. "If you're going to ask her the same question, I better put the phone on mute." [Laughter]

"I, too, was a fan of Bill's playing before we got to know each other," says his wife, whose first name rhymes with teeny. "So whenever I hear him play, I'm always amazed and very engaged in what he's doing. And when we play together, the only way I can describe it is when actors are acting in a scene, and then they see the finished product and they get different feelings—or certainly, so many more details come to light, whether it's in the actual cinematography, or a certain look that the other actor has that you didn't quite notice at that moment you were reacting to it. It's gone in an instant, it's in the air. And then when you listen back, you get a whole new sense of what it is that you did."

Jokes about locked horns aside, hovering over Double Portrait—a stellar program of tunes by jazz luminaries Joe Henderson, Gerry Mulligan, and Wayne Shorter, and songwriter-composers George Gershwin and Antonio Carlos Jobim—is a calming vibe, some of which comes from the strength of the pair's relationship offstage, and some from the time of year it was recorded. In the ensuing back and forth conversation, which in some ways mirrors what's on the record, a sense of the couple's bond, their finish-each-other's-sentences attachment, becomes immediately apparent.

"We made this record right between Christmas and New Year's..." the husband begins, "...which may seem like an odd time for other people," the wife continues, "but because we're family and we knew we had a bit of downtime there... and then we had to find the venue as well, so we could seal it off and have private use."

"During that period between Christmas and New Year's, there's a certain quietude to [New York City]," Charlap says. "Generally, people are not at work, and the pace comes down just a little bit. There's something about that, a kind of quietness. It's nice, and that feeling is kind of in the record."

"It's almost a time when the whole city kind of exhales after the bustle of Christmas Day, and finally it's over," Rosnes takes over. "Everybody takes a breather, and that's part of what you hear on this record."

Charlap has the last word: "There's certainly an intimacy to this record that came from that."

As musical couples go, Rosnes and Charlap are new to the game, having been married only three years. Each came to the marriage with an impressive résumé. Born in Saskatchewan and raised in Vancouver, Rosnes moved to New York in 1985, and subsequently played in the bands of Joe Henderson and Wayne Shorter, among others. She's appeared in numerous recording sessions led by Henderson, Marian McPartland, Jon Faddis, Jimmy Scott, and her ex-husband, Billy Drummond. She's also made a number of excellent albums as a leader, including Art & Soul (1999) and Renee Rosnes with the Danish Radio Big Band (2003), both for Blue Note.

A cousin of famed pianist Dick Hyman, Bill Charlap is the son of Broadway tunesmith Mark Charlap and singer Sandy Stewart. Signed, like his wife, to Blue Note, beginning in 2000 he led a half-dozen sessions for the label, including a duet record with his mother and two highly regarded songbook albums: Somewhere: The Songs of Leonard Bernstein (2004) and The American Soul: Bill Charlap Plays George Gershwin (2005).

Busy with, between them, two performing careers and three children, the pair say they'd been wanting to record together since they were married, in 2007. "It was never a case of whether or not we were going to do it; it was just a case of when," Rosnes says. "We have a natural combining of our chemistry. It's just... fun. We enjoy it."
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As for choosing the material for Double Portrait, "There were hundreds and hundreds of things that we loved," Charlap continues, "but it was just a matter of finding a balance that tells a story."

"And this is just a snapshot anyway," Rosnes adds. "We could make ten albums. It's not necessarily that we loved one tune more than another and so we chose that tune for the record; I mean, there's so many we wanted to do. We were looking for a wide palette of moods and colors and feels. Some of the things that we chose were pieces we always wanted to do and hadn't yet."

"There were things that we loved but needed to find the right context to play them in, and duet was that right context," says Charlap. "Like 'My Man's Gone Now', or Lyle Mays' 'Chorino.'"

The Gershwin tune, in many ways the spiritual heart of the album, is also perhaps its strongest track. "It's a piece that I've always loved but never really delved into," Rosnes says. "There's so much intricacy within the actual composition; there's so much material, so much weight, so much beautiful writing, that many times when jazz groups play that piece, a lot of the beautiful little intricacies that Gershwin wrote are done away with. It was enjoyable to really go back and examine the piece in its real, full blossom and find those little magic moments, and have this arrangement reflect all of what Gershwin wrote."

"One of the things Renee is talking about—it's implied in what she's said—is that it's not just a tune, a popular song by Gershwin, but remember, it's from Porgy and Bess. It's an aria, and the way we approached it, like Renee said, is using all of what Gershwin has in his original score, but finding a way, of course, to put our voice on it too."

Rosnes picks up the thread: "Jazz readings of it, there's so many lines and counterlines, and that's also what made it a natural for the two pianos. There are so many things going on that there's lots for two pianos to play."

Deciding which pianist plays what was obviously at the center of the making of Double Portrait. But both husband and wife say that, like much else in their relationship, choosing what Gershwin has in his original score, but finding a way, of course, to put our voice on it too."

"We did set some sense of who's going to play the melody where," Rosnes says, "but aside from the most basic elements of who's going to play the melody, a lot of it is just kind of organic and happens spontaneously. We may have played a certain way a few times in concert, and when we get home we might trade back and forth in a different way, or somebody might take the ending, or somebody might play a different type of an intro. It's always different, and because we know each other so well, certainly, if we have eye contact, there's a lot to be said without verbally having to instruct each other. We do have a level of communication that translates to the music, which gives us a lot of freedom, ultimately."

Despite the couple's shared vision of the record they wanted to make, a producer was still needed, and longtime Charlap confidant Joel Moss was brought in. What, exactly, was his role in this keyboard lovefest?

"During the whole Renee courtship, I was the 26-phone-calls-a-day guy," says Moss. "As Moss tells me this over the phone from his home in upstate New York, I can hear his smile spread. While he clearly admires the pianists' talents, Moss is also the guy to add some needed clarity to their relationships both musical and romantic. "They're madly in love, and they do something musically that's almost indescribable. They come from such different places. Bill is a lunatic rehearsing machine, and Renee never rehearses at all—hardly ever practices. Her gift comes from a far-off place and overtakes her. When it comes to take, Bill's always got one better in him, and with Renee, it's an expression that happens, and can't be better because it's pure."

As for how much was prepared beforehand and how much just happened during the sessions, "All the obbligato stuff they had down, and they had a loose idea of where the solos would go and who would play them. On the endings and transitions, I made some suggestions."

Moss was also responsible for the sound of the album, which was recorded over three days in Kaufmann concert Hall, at Manhattan's 92nd Street Y. Saying that he wanted to "let music take over the hall," Moss was surprised that it took him only an hour and a half to figure out how and where to place the microphones. Kaufmann was chosen over, say, Avatar Studios on W. 53rd Street, because all three agreed they wanted the sound to simply be that of two pianos being played in Kaufmann's empty, resounding space. Another factor was the presence of a pair of first-rate Steinway grand pianos, one of which, the Kaufmann's resident instrument, had been handpicked years ago by none other than Bill Charlap.

"It's a little less than a 1000-seat concert hall, all wood, and the sound that you hear on the album is the sound of the hall. We really wanted the natural reverberance and acoustic sound, spatially yet with definition."

In time, Double Portrait may be looked back on as a defining moment in the history of husband-and-wife musical collaborations, if for no other reason the chemistry that's present. After a number of listens, their simpatico voicing and phrasings—their chemistry if you must—is quite remarkable. For the pair at the center of it, it just feels right—which, in the end, may be what's most important. "One of the ways, generally, to gauge if you've had a good night is when you ask yourself, 'What did I play? and you can't remember any of it,'" Rosnes says, "You're so much in the moment of spontaneity, in the process of experiencing it and letting it go. That's what can also be beautiful about the recording process, if you can capture some of that kind of magic—and I believe that we got a lot of it on this album."

Magic, you say? What about the small matter of the final track, a version of Frank Loesser's "Never Will I Marry," a tune made famous by Judy Garland, among others. Is its presence on Double Portrait a goof, or a discordant note in this otherwise halcyon sea of conubial bliss?

"It's kind of tongue-in-cheek—that title is not lost on us," Charlap says. "We actually loved the tune, and thought it fit in perfectly, in some kind of austere way."

Since everything went so swimmingly on Double Portrait, and there are so many more tunes each player wants to tackle, more collaborations are just around the corner, right?

There is a long pause. Finally, Charlap jumps in: "Absolutely—I want to do another record with her." He's half jesting, as if suddenly remembering to say precisely what the wife wants to hear. That the wife laughs is a good sign. You know, we can talk separately about making records together, if you guys want to do that, I offer one last time, hoping to find a chink in the armor, or at least get a laugh.

Rosnes is game. "Yeah, call me back later, and we'll really talk about making the record."
EQUIPMENT REPORT

Vivid Audio
G1Giya
LOUDSPEAKER

WES PHILLIPS

Over the years that I’ve been reviewing hi-fi, I’ve had my share of loudspeakers that drew comments from everyone who visited during the audition period. Some of those comments were about the speakers’ appearance—most often about their size—and some were about how good they sounded. Vivid’s G1Giya loudspeaker ($65,000/pair), its narrow-baffled, swirling cochlear shape molded from fiber-reinforced composite, elicited more comments of both types than has any other speaker I’ve reviewed.

This started even before I got them into my living room, as Philip O’Hanlon, of Vivid importer On a Higher Note, and Stealth Audio’s Serguei Tunadrev, and I unpacked the Giyas from their crates on the street (while the Giyas made it safely down my front hall, the crates couldn’t). My next-door neighbor and his next-door neighbor sauntered over to see what we were doing. “Wow. Are those art or are they speakers?” As it turned out, the G1Giya is both.

Learn from the past, set vivid goals for the future
Vivid Audio is not a familiar name to many audiophiles, but the company has its roots in one of the most iconic audio designs of all times, the B&W Nautlius. Among Vivid’s owners are Robert Trunz, erstwhile co-owner of Bowers & Wilkins, and Laurence Dickie, who used to design B&W’s drivers at their R&D facility in Steyning, England.

When Trunz left B&W, in 1996, he emigrated to South Africa, where he met Philip Guttentlg and Bruce and Dee Gessner, who had been in the retail hi-fi business but were now interested in building high-end loudspeakers in South Africa. Trunz suggested that they bring in Dickie to design drivers rather than rely on OEM designs. Vivid Audio launched their first products, the B1 and K1 floorstanders, in 2004. By 2006, the partners felt the range needed a flagship product, a design process which would take over...
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eighteen months before a prototype could be shown at CES 2008.

Enter the G1Giya (the line now includes the smaller G2). Dickie had created the “Tapered tube loading” concept for the Nautilus line, and he believed in it (read the white paper about it at www.onahighernote.com/vivid?c=1). The technology consists of coupling a driver to an exponentially tapered tube filled with damping fiber. The act of dragging the fiber into the tube causes it to compress at the narrow end, significantly reducing internal reflections. Dickie envisioned the Giya as a more structurally integrated version of tapered tubes attached to drivers than any previous design. This also led to the G1Giya’s Smurf-like profile, as its woofers’ tubes curve into a “jug handle” at the speaker’s apex.

The organic shape and materials of the G1Giya’s vacuum-infused, fiber-composite cabinet are not so much matters of style (although they evince style a-plenty) as of function. The woofer tube is curved to prevent the speaker from occupying too large a footprint.

The Giya’s baffle reduces cabinet reflections, and the enclosure’s downward taper when seen from the side allows the tapered tubes of the midbass, midrange, and tweeter drive-units each to be solidly coupled to the rear of the nacelle with a single locking screw. The Giya’s constantly changing profile and depth make it hard to state dimensions, but to make a complex shape simple, call it 66.3” H by 172” W by 31.2” D.

The G1Giya is a four-way design with five drivers. Its two 11” (279mm) anodized aluminum woofers are mounted on opposite sides of the cabinet and mechanically coupled. Directly behind each woofer is a vent tuned to 23Hz; the drivers themselves are loaded by the aforementioned curving, tapered tubes, by a tube amplifier having a typically high source impedance. The small wrinkle in the traces at 34kHz indicates that this is the primary resonant frequency of the small-diameter tweeter dome. Another wrinkle, at 450Hz, might be due

**Fig.1 Vivid G1Giya, electrical impedance (solid) and phase (dashed).**

![Figure 1](image1.png)

(2 ohms/vertical div.)

**Fig.2 Vivid G1Giya, anechoic response on upper-midrange axis at 50°, without grilles, averaged across 30° horizontal window and corrected for microphone response, with complex sum of nearfield midrange and tweeter responses plotted below 300Hz (black), and with nearfield responses of lower-midrange unit (green), woofers (blue), and ports (red), plotted below 400Hz, 1kHz, and 500Hz, respectively.

![Figure 2](image2.png)

www.Stereophile.com, July 2010
tuned to 100Hz.

Set into a shallow depression on the baffle are the 1" (26mm) aluminum catenary dome tweeter, 2" (50mm) aluminum catenary dome midrange, and 4.9" (125mm) aluminum-cone lower-midrange unit. All drivers have cylindrical magnets to leave a large-diameter vent behind the diaphragm in order to couple to the tapered tube, are decoupled from the baffle by ring mounts, are Vivid's own proprietary designs, and are explained in great detail at Vivid's website (www.vividaudio.com).

The crossover frequencies are 220, 880, and 3500Hz. "As far as the filter order is concerned," says Dickie, "we use Linkwitz-Riley fourth-order acoustic responses; that is to say that the overall responses of each driver and crossover combination are fourth-order. Now, since most drivers have a natural second-order rolloff at their lower end and often a first or second at the top end, this means the electrical network order might only need to be second- or third-order."

**Set vivid, detailed goals**

Other than accessing their bottom-mounted, biwirable speaker terminals—a two-person job—the G1Giyas weren't difficult to set up. Their narrow profile favors a slight toe-in, and they like room to breathe; in my room, they ended up 46" from the sidewalls and 71" from the front wall.

The Vivid has a claimed sensitivity of 91dB; I was able to easily drive them with all of the amplifiers I had in-house: Aesthetix Atlas (200Wpc) and Balanced Audio Technology VK-55SE (55Wpc) stereo amps, and Luxman B1000f (250W) and Parasound Halo JC 1 (400W) monoblocks. You'd expect the big monoblocks to have enough grunt to drive almost anything, but even the relatively low-powered BAT drove the Giyas to remarkable levels with no loss of clarity or air. I wouldn't attempt to drive the Vivids with a single-ended-triode design or a low-current solid-state amplifier—but neither, I suspect, would anyone else.

A caution, however: Although the G1Giyas' grille is a very open wire mesh, it did muffle the sound to a degree that, while not exactly egregious, affected the speaker's openness and detail more than I could tolerate. On the other hand, the 50mm dome is fragile, and a magnet for curious fingers and god knows what else.

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**measurements, continued**

However, using a stethoscope and Faber Acoustical's SignalSuite generator running on my iPod Touch, I could only detect mild cabinet problems. (Logistical problems—I left it at home when I visited Wes—meant that I couldn't test the cabinet with my usual accelerometer.) The highest-level modes were on the sidewall level with the lower midrange unit at 275 and 315Hz, with another low-level mode audible at 550Hz. This behavior should not have any subjective consequences.

The green trace in fig.2 shows the response of the lower-midrange unit, measured in the nearfield. This driver appears to cross over to the twin woofers (blue trace) at 220Hz as specified, with symmetrical fourth-order acoustic slopes, also as specified. The woofers have some slight peakiness evident in the midrange, but this is well suppressed by the crossover and will be ameliorated by the fact that the woofers fire to the speaker's sides. The black and blue traces are identical below 100Hz because, contrary to my usual practice, I have shown the port response (red trace) separately rather than calculate the complex sum of the woofer and port responses. This was again due to logistical problems; the file containing the port output measured with MLSSA was corrupt and I had to remeasure it at a later date with a different, more portable system (Fuzzmeasure from SMUGSoftware). I also repeated the woofer and midrange nearfield responses, to check that there was no systematic error, which there wasn't.

The woofers are loaded with a unique vented transmission line, which gives the G1Giya its distinctive shape. Conventional transmission-line designs almost always feature pipe resonances of some kind that give rise to problems in the upper bass. However, the outputs of the G1's woofers (fig.2, blue and black traces) are generally smooth within their passband; though some small peaks might be due to residual line effects, these are too small to have any effect on the quality of the low-frequency sound. Laurence Dickie's tapered lines do appear to work as advertised. The port's output (red trace) basically reinforces the G1's output below 30Hz and rolls out in a relatively well-behaved manner above 45Hz. (I usually plot nearfield responses by scaling them in the ratio of...
Somehow, both midrange drivers wound up denting during their stay at my house—I know I didn’t do it, and I don’t think any of the adults in the household did either, but I recommend religiously replacing the grilles after every listening session. Fortunately, this is easy to do: they’re held in place by magnets within the baffle.

**Vivid images are like a beautiful melody**

Cold out of their crates, the GI Giyas sounded great: dynamic, open, rich, and, yes, vivid. It turned out that that was how they sounded when literally cold—the temperature outside was in the teens. Within an hour they were sounding more dynamic, open, rich, and vivid.

O’Hanlon, Timachev, and I chatted and listened, whiling away the afternoon until John Atkinson arrived and played some of his most recent high-resolution recording projects. Wowzers! My realism meter was pegged at 11!

I was consistently impressed by the GI Giya’s dynamic range and jump factor. Then Philip O’Hanlon asked if he could audition some of his own hi-rez digital files. He likes to listen loud. He cranked the Luxman monoblocks into hyperdrive (or at least to somewhere above 100dB). To my surprise, even at extremely high volume levels, the Giyas retained all their clarity and focus—and produced deep bass that immediately set off car alarms in front of my house.

This was indeed impressive performance. I don’t typically listen at such a high volume, but I’d never heard a loudspeaker return such a feeling of limitless naturalism. Even at levels that had to be overloading my listening room, there was no sense of in imminent—or any—dynamic compression. Not that there can’t be dynamic compression from live acoustic music—I’ve heard the Chicago Symphony Orchestra overload Carne-

The square roots of the respective radiating areas, but the complex shape of the GI Giya’s port opening meant that I had to guesstimate its relative level.

Higher in frequency in fig.2, the GI Giya’s farfield response, averaged across a 30° horizontal window on the upper-midrange axis, is smooth and even, though it does look as if there is a slight excess of energy in the midrange and a slight lack of energy in the mid-treble. The upper-octave response is well extended. Wes had a problem with the GI’s wire-mesh grilles, writing that they “muffle[d] the sound to a degree that . . . affected their openness and detail more than I could tolerate.” Fig.3 shows the effect of the grille on the Vivid’s response measured on its upper-midrange axis. You can see that while the grille does have a slight effect, this is restricted to the speaker’s output above 10kHz, and then suppresses the tweeter’s output by, at most, only 0.5dB. I’m not sure, therefore, why the grilles would have as much of an effect on the sound as Wes found in his auditioning, though they did bong a bit when struck.

A speaker’s perceived sound balance depends on its dispersion as well as on its direct sound. Fig.4 shows the Vivid’s lateral dispersion, referenced to the response on the upper-midrange axis. The radiation pattern is admirably smooth and even between 500Hz and 8kHz, something that always correlates with stable, accurate stereo imaging. Below that range is a slight dropoff at extreme angles, presumably due to the crossover between the lower-frequency drive-units, while above 8kHz, the speaker becomes a little more directional than I was expecting from its use of a small-diameter tweeter. In a large room, therefore, the GI’s might sound a little mellow, though this will be offset if the owner uses a tube amplifier, due to the impedance effect mentioned earlier. In the vertical plane (fig.5), the GIya’s response changes very little over quite a wide window—just as well, given that the upper-midrange axis is a high 43” from the floor.

The red trace in fig.6 shows the GI Giya’s spatially averaged response, calculated from 20 measurements of the left and right speakers individually taken in a vertical rectangular grid 36” wide by 18” tall and centered on the position of WP’s ears in his listening chair. As suggested by the direct-sound response in fig.2, there is a little too much
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Vivid Audio Gigiya

But that sense of limitless ease is one of the ways that live music retains its edge over reproduced sound. It’s a quality I’ve never heard another loudspeaker do better than the G1Giya.

“The Wardrobe Master of Paradise,” from The Conjure Project’s Conjure (American Clavé, 24-bit/88kHz FLAC download from HDtracks.com), had a soundstage extraordinarily wide and deep. Taj Mahal’s gravelly growl had depth and a remarkably lifelike huskiness. David Murray’s tenor had bite and startling presence. However, it was the Haitian drummers who stole the show—their drums leapt from the mix with the speed and bite and, especially, the sensation of inhabiting an acoustic space. It was uncannily life-like. I attended the recording sessions for this album, so I know it was recorded in the old Electric Lady studios—not a large, reverberant venue, though you’d never know it from the sound of this album.

“Ducks on the Wall,” from the Kinks’ A Soap Opera (Koch International, 24/96 FLAC download, HDtracks), began with an extremely rude duck call that the G1Giyas delivered with close-to-squarewave nastiness, before breaking into a raucous boogie featuring Dave Davies’ cutting guitar and some tasty bass playing from John Dalton. Ray Davies’ shouted vocals are very up-front, but overall, A Soap Opera offers solid studio rock sound—that guitar is crisp, and the bass is tight and moderately extended.

“Suite de Caravan,” from Jon Hassell’s Fascinoma (Water Lily Acoustics, 24/88 FLAC download, HDtracks), sounded amazing through the G1s. I’ve listened to this track on CD for years, and expected this hi-rez download to sound atmospheric and timbrally alive. What I didn’t anticipate was how huge the acoustic space it took place in must have been. A duet between trumpeter Hassell and pianist Jacky Terrasson, it created, through the Vivids, a soundstage that stretched...
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from wall to wall, floor to ceiling, and behind the speakers to some point beyond my front wall. It was, perhaps, the most convincing job of transporting this behind the speakers to some point from wall to wall, floor to ceiling, and trumpet, Terrasson's piano constantly against Hassell's restrained (and muted) have ever experienced.

Part of this, again, was the effortless way the G1Giyas had with dynamics—against Hassell's restrained (and muted) trumpet, Terrasson's piano constantly leaps between foreground and background. His syncopated accompaniment kept startling me with its facile jumps and emphases. I shouldn't have been surprised—after all, one experiences this all the time with live music, even acoustic duets, but recorded sound frequently smooths out those dynamic peaks and valleys. Not so through the G1Giyas.

Another immense soundscape was presented by “Tea Leaf Prophecy,” from Herbie Hancock's River: The Joni Letters (Verve, 24/96 FLAC download, HDtracks). Drummer Vinnie Colaiuta's brushwork sounded anchored in the recording space, Dave Holland's acoustic bass was extended and concrete, while Hancock's piano filled all the spaces between the other instruments, creating a three-dimensional construct that was sonically compelling. And then there was Mitchell's husky voice, now almost a tenor thanks to age and cigarettes (I don't mean that as a put-down; she's more in control of her instrument than ever, I think). But what made me jump, every time, was how present and—I keep returning to this word—lifelike Wayne Shorter's soprano saxophone sounded.

Ezra Pound said that “literature is news that stays news.” The Vivid G1Giya reinforced that his statement is just as true of great music.

Memories so real and vivid
During the G1Giyas' stay in my system, the only other Class A speakers also visiting were Thiel's CS3.7s. One might justifiably claim that comparing the $12,900/pair Thiel to the $65,000/pair Vivids is inherently unfair, but the CS3.7s are listed in Class A (Limited Extreme LF) of Stereophile's “Recommended Components,” and I did say in my review of them in the December 2008 issue (www.stereophile.com/floorloudspeakers/1208thi) that I loved them. So, of course, I was cruel to them.

Playing “The Wardrobe Master of Paradise,” the Thiel delivered a smaller soundstage than the Vivids, albeit one still perfectly formed. The G1Giya's bass was more extended, and the Haitian drummers had greater jump factor. The Thiel's toned down the gawpy stomp of the Kinks'' "Ducks on the Wall," but only by a bit. I speculate that this might have more to do with the original recording quality of A Soap Opera than anything else—a speaker can't reproduce what never made it onto the tape. The G1Giyas did go a tad deeper, and Dave Davies' guitar may have had a bit more of the buzz saw to it, but the difference wasn't immense.

Not so with Hassell's “Suite de Caravan,” however. Again the Thiel's reduced the size of the soundstage, especially the vertical dimension. Dynamic contrasts, while quite good, were not as lifelike IS VIVID AUDIO'S G1GIYA THE BEST LOUDSPEAKER I'VE EVER HEARD? YES.

Whether or not you can afford a pair, you should listen to them so that you know exactly what is possible in a high-end loudspeaker.

IS VIVID AUDIO'S G1GIYA THE BEST LOUDSPEAKER I'VE EVER HEARD? YES. On the other hand, I've heard some extremely expensive speakers, costing two and even three times the Vivids' price, that can do one or two of the things the G1Giyas do so well. But I can't think of any speaker I've auditioned that does everything as well as the Giyas: superb imaging, unmatched dynamic range, holographic soundstaging, and that immutable, possibly unquantifiable quality known as musicality.

Is Vivid Audio's G1Giya the best loudspeaker I've ever heard? Yes. And it will be my yardstick from now on. Whether or not you can afford a pair, you should listen to them so that you know exactly what is possible in a high-end loudspeaker.

Through the Thiel as through the Giyas—and this is precisely one of the qualities I most admired about the CS3.7, and still do. Terrasson's piano sounded more in the same plane as Hassell's trumpet than it did through the Vivids.

And that was pretty much the story with “Tea Leaf Prophecy,” as well. Compared to the G1Giyas, the Thiel's reduced both the scale of the soundstage and the instruments' timbral richness. At some point in such comparisons, I always ask myself if the differences are night-and-day—or is one speaker right and the other wrong? I respond unequivocally: Yes and no. Were the Vivids, in my opinion, better than the Thiel's? Yes. Were the Thiel's wrong?
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Wilson Audio
Sasha W/P

DESCRIPTION

Three-way, reflex-loaded, floorstanding loudspeaker. Drive-units: 1" titanium inverted-dome tweeter, 7" pulp-composite midrange cone, two 8" polymer woofer cones. Sensitivity: 91dB/2.83V/m. Impedance: 4 ohms nominal, 1.9 ohms minimum.

DIMENSIONS

44" (1118mm) H by 14" (356mm) W by 21.25" (539mm) D. Weight: 197 lbs (89.4kg).

FINISHES

High-gloss automotive paint; custom finishes, including paint-matching, available at extra cost.

SERIAL NUMBERS OF UNITS REVIEWED

0395, 0396.

PRICE

$26,900/pair. Approximate number of dealers: 39.

MANUFACTURER
Wilson Audio Specialties, 2233 Mountain Vista Lane, Provo, UT 84606.
Tel: (801) 377-2233.
Fax: (801) 377-2282.

Before last year, I had no more than a professional interest in the products of Wilson Audio Specialties. But before last year I hadn't experienced Wilson's Sophia Series 2 loudspeaker ($16,700/pair)—which, like the wines I tend to order when my wife and I go out to dinner, is the second-cheapest item on their menu. Within weeks of the Sophias' arrival, respect had turned to rapture, like to love, and an entirely new appreciation for Wilson Audio was mine.¹

I was also impressed that the people of Wilson seemed willing to say, more or less, "Yes, we know there's something special about our second-cheapest floorstander, and yes, we're working to bring that quality to the rest of our line." Trickled-up technology is a rare and wonderful thing.

So, too, is it unusual for a manufacturer to both improve a product and lower its price at one stroke. Yet that's what appears to have happened in the second half of 2009, when Wilson phased out their popular WATT/Puppy loudspeaker—then in its eighth iteration—and replaced it with the Sasha W/P, which sells for $26,900/pair: fully $2150 less than its predecessor.

Thus, when Wilson Audio asked me to listen to their new midpriced machine, saying no was no option.

Description

The origins of the Sasha W/P date back to 1985, when David Wilson, then more

experienced as a recordist than as a manufacturer, devised what he intended as a portable monitor loudspeaker of unusually low coloration. The result was the Wilson Audio Tiny Tot, or WATT, then remarkable not only for its performance—its clarity and tonal neutrality earned generous praise from the critics of the day—but for breaking the minimonitor price barrier. At the time, a four-figure price for a pair of stand-mounted speakers with very limited bass response was considered stiff, to say the least. Nevertheless, and despite its pro-audio origins (and consequent lack of logistic sophistication), the WATT found an appreciative audience among domestic audio enthusiasts.

That success didn’t so much change David Wilson as redirect his focus, from making records in many settings to making loudspeakers in just one: a not-pro-audio origins (and consequent lack of logistic sophistication), the WATT found an appreciative audience among domestic audio enthusiasts. That success didn’t so much change David Wilson as redirect his focus, from making records in many settings to making loudspeakers in just one: a not-unappealing shift in emphasis for a man with a young family. Wilson set about refining the WATT, slowly reworking his crossover network and availing himself of new technologies in drivers and enclosure materials—the latter often of his own invention—all while never straying far from his original concept. And before long, Wilson had addressed his speakers’ basslessness: first with the Beard, a rigid baffle extension that limited dipole cancellation and enhanced bass dispersion, and ultimately with the Puppy, a woofier enclosure that doubled as a stand for the WATT. From the latter day forward, although consumers could still buy just a pair of WATTs, most Wilson customers opted for a complete WATT/Puppy system—and their numbers grew surprisingly quickly.

After having developed that full-range system through eight distinct incarnations, David Wilson and his team decided that the ninth level of refinement would require them to stop thinking of the WATT and Puppy as separate commercial entities. Accordingly, they retired those names, even if the product now known as the Sasha is officially named the Sasha W/P (just as the Napoleon who was born in 1811 was officially Napoleon II).

The Sasha W/P, though outwardly similar to the WATT/Puppy Series 8, is very slightly larger overall. Its upper and lower enclosures, both of which are reflex-loaded through precisely machined rear-firing ports, have greater volume than their predecessors, benefits of which are said to be increased bass extension and freedom from upper-bass congestion. And while the cabinet continues to be made from proprietary phenolic-based laminates developed at Wilson Audio, the front baffle of the Sasha W/P is made of an even newer and different such material that better suits the resonant characteristics of the higher-frequency drivers.

The enclosures also look somewhat different from their forebears. Crisp new

MEASUREMENTS

Other than the in-room and nearfield measurements, for which I used a Joe D’Appolito–designed Mitey Mike II and an Earthworks QTC-40 microphone, respectively, the quasi-anechoic measurements of the Wilson Audio Specialties Sasha W/P were performed using DRA Labs’ MLSA system and a calibrated DPA 4006 microphone. Wilson specifies the Sasha’s voltage sensitivity as 91dB/2.83V/m, which was confirmed by my own measurements. This is usefully higher than average. On the other hand, the Sasha’s plot of impedance magnitude and electrical phase (fig.1) reveals the speaker to be a demanding load for the partnering amplifier to drive. Not only does the impedance drop below 4 ohms for most of the lower midrange and upper bass, with a minimum value of 2 ohms at 86Hz, but there is also an amplifier-unfriendly combination of 3 ohms and –43° phase angle at 61Hz. I’m surprised that Art’s Shindo Corton-Charlemagne monoblocks, even when wired for 4 ohm operation, worked as well as they did, though I’m not surprised that his Shindo Haut-Brion, with its 16-ohm output secondaries, weren’t happy driving the Wilsons.

Other than the effect of the tweeter’s primary diaphragm resonance at 20kHz, the impedance traces in fig.1 are free from the small wrinkles that would imply the existence of cabinet resonances of various kinds. And indeed, investigating the vibrational behavior of the enclosure panels with a plastic-tape accelerometer, I found very little of note. The side panels of both W and P of the W/P were extremely inert; I show only a cumulative spectral-decay plot calculated from the accelerometer’s output while it was fastened to the top panel of what I still like to call the “WATT” (fig.2) to demonstrate just how low in level were the only two modes I could find. The heroic construction of this speaker’s two enclosures is very effective at suppressing panel resonances.

The low-frequency saddle centered on 26Hz in the impedance-magnitude trace in fig.1 suggests that this is the

![Fig.1 Wilson Sasha W/P, electrical impedance (solid) and phase (dashed). (2 ohms/vertical div.)](image1)

![Fig.2 Wilson Sasha W/P, cumulative spectral-decay plot calculated from output of accelerometer fastened to top panel of upper enclosure (MLS driving voltage to speaker, 7.5V; measurement bandwidth, 2kHz).](image2)
WILSON AUDIO SPECIALTIES SASHA W/P

lines, rather like the midbody creases one sees in contemporary auto design, are added to both enclosures, near where they join one another: The resulting converging lines lend visual interest to the "sculpture" as a whole, and actually keep the eye from being troubled when the angle of the small enclosure is changed, relative to the larger one, as often must be done in setup. And the shapes of the two enclosures now blend together much better when viewed from the back—a not-insignificant consideration in an expensive product that’s meant to stand clear of everything else in a presumably well-appointed room.

All four drivers in the three-way Sasha W/P are proprietary Wilson designs; each has been either upgraded from its own predecessor or brought in from the next most expensive model in the Wilson line. Among the latter is the Sasha’s 1" inverted titanium-dome tweeter, sourced from Focal and developed for the Maxx Series 3 ($68,000/pair), and described as the fruit of Wilson’s best efforts to prevent rear-firing energy from creating high-frequency distortion. The tweeter’s second-order high-pass filter is tailored to approximately 18kHz, below which Wilson’s 7" midrange driver, also developed for the Maxx 3, takes over. David Wilson says that the pulp-composite driver could actually extend as far as 11kHz without the crossover—“The way we’re using it, it’s kind of loafing”—and he stresses the need for a good midrange driver to accommodate very different demands: “In the bass, performance tends to cooperate more with the math and science. But there’s a bit more art to the midrange, where you need both high excursion and great subtlety of detail.”

The second-order high-pass filter for the midrange driver is set at about 150Hz, which is also the frequency for the woofer’s first-order low-pass filter. The woofers, made for Wilson by ScanSpeak, are based on the 8” polymer-cone woofers from the WATT/Puppy 8. But for the Sasha W/P they’ve doubled up on the magnets, which reportedly yields better acceleration and electrodynamic damping.

As noted on the Wilson website and confirmed to me by David Wilson, the Sasha W/P has an electrical sensitivity of 91dB and is nominally a 4-ohm load, albeit one that drops to 1.8 ohms at 92Hz. Amplifiers of 20Wpc output or higher are recommended—a line I happily toed.

Installation and setup

I was tempted, at first, to suggest that the hardest part of setting up the Sasha W/Ps was getting them off the truck and into my house. But even that wasn’t much of a challenge: As I learned when I wrote about the Sophia Series 2 loudspeaker, Wilson Audio works with only a select few freight companies, and their shipping manager oversees the entire process, from loading dock to doorstep.

Fig 3 Wilson Sasha W/P, acoustic crossover on listening axis at 50”, corrected for microphone response, with nearfield responses of midrange unit (blue), woofer (black), and port (red), all plotted below 350Hz.

The output of the midrange drive-unit rises gently by a usual 24dB/octave slope you get from a reflex design; I suspect the port is used to increase the midrange unit’s power handling rather than to extend its low-frequency response. Higher in frequency in fig 3, the midrange (blue) and tweeter (green) responses were taken at 50” in the farfield, on an axis I calculated to be equivalent to the position of Art’s ears in his listening chair. Art sits with his ears 39” from the floor, and the in-room measurements I had performed in his room indicated that each of his ears was 87.5” from a Sasha tweeter. Following the excellent instructions engraved on a metal plate on the Puppy’s top panel, Peter McGrath had set the speakers up in Art’s room with the shortest set of spikes between each Sasha’s two enclosures. In the room I use for measurements in inclement weather, I measure a speaker at a distance of 50” rather than 87.5” because, with the speaker raised off the floor so that its tweeter lies halfway between floor and ceiling, all reflections from the room boundaries and the mike stand arrive at the mike position for all of my farfield measurements.

The output of the midrange drive-unit rises gently by a couple of dB between 400Hz and 1kHz, and rolls off above 2kHz, with several peaks evident in its out-of-band response. I assume that these are cone breakup modes—the lowest-frequency mode, at 4.1kHz, is not very well suppressed by the crossover. The tweeter covers the region above 3kHz rather than the specified 1.8kHz, and has a basically flat response within its passband, with a couple of small peaks balanced by adjacent dips. Its output does rise above 15kHz due to the tweeter resonance at 20kHz, but the peak is not that high. The output drops rapidly above 20kHz.

www.Stereophile.com, July 2010
After opening the three very large wooden crates—one each for the bottom enclosures and a third for the pair of tops—and carefully removing their contents, I had a close look at the various Sasha components. As with other recent Wilson speakers, there was a distinct but indescribable seriousness to the drivers’ appearance: the sort of neatness and precision that suggest a level of quality far beyond the reach of the DIY crowd (not to mention many other manufacturers). As with Watt/Puppies of the past, electrical connections between drivers are visible on the enclosures’ back panels: Signal leads of fixed length, terminated with gold-plated spade lugs, emerge from the Sashas’ lower enclosures, in which the crossover networks are now located. (For as long as the model was called the Watt/Puppy, the woofer module was viewed as an add-on: The crossover remained in the “main” upper-frequency enclosure.) On the back of each bottom enclosure is a single pair of inputs, addressable only with spade lugs for connection to the amplifier of choice.

Throughout my review samples, the attention to detail was astonishing. All Wilson Audio Specialties Sasha W/P loudspeaker two Sashas were extraordinarily close in response, matching to within 0.2dB or less over most of the audioband, with differences of up to 1dB evident in only two very narrow regions: between 1100 and 1500Hz, and between 4 and 5kHz (not shown).

The Sashas’ lateral dispersion, referenced to its on-axis response, is shown in fig.5. While at first the speaker’s off-axis behavior seems a bit peaky between 4 and 8kHz, this is actually due to the on-axis suckouts in this region filling in to the speaker’s sides; in a typical room, the Wilson’s mid-treble balance will be smooth and neutral. A slight reduction in off-axis energy between 700Hz and 1.3kHz might mitigate the effect of the slight on-axis boost in the same region. As is normal with a 1” tweeter, the dispersion narrows in the top octave, but not to the usual degree. The tweeter also puts out a little more energy to the sides above 20kHz than it does on axis, which is why there appear to be off-axis peaks in this region. In the ver-

![Fig.4 Wilson Sasha W/P, anechoic response on listening axis at 50° without grille, averaged across 30° horizontal window and corrected for microphone response, with complex sum of nearfield responses plotted below 300Hz.](image)

![Fig.5 Wilson Sasha W/P, lateral response family at 50°, normalized to response on listening axis without grille, from back to front: differences in response 90°-5° off axis, reference response, differences in response 5°-90° off axis.](image)
pad—assigned a value to each change he noted. There was an order. There was a hierarchy. There was a system.

The distances from the Sashas to the walls of my 19' by 12' room changed, and changed again. So did the angle of the Sashas' toe-in, and the precisely adjustable angle between the upper and lower enclosures. So did the height of their chunky and smoothly machined floor spikes. To no one's surprise, the Sasha W/Ps wound up very near to where the Sophias had worked best. And though I don't want to get ahead of myself, it must be said that, when Peter McGrath's work was over, I was powerless to prevent myself from staying up way too late, listening to music. McGrath doth murder sleep.

Listening
As I recall, the Wilson Sophia Series 2 required about 10 days' steady use before sounding really great in my home. Similarly, a little more than a week after Peter McGrath installed them in the exact same system—Thorens TD 124 turntable with modern Schopper platter and bearing; EMT 997 tonearm, fitted with various EMT and Ortofon SPU pickup heads; Ayre Acoustics QB-9 USB D/A converter, fed AIFF files from an Apple iMac; Shindo Masseto preamplifier, and Shindo Corton-Charlemagne mono amplifiers, their output-transformer secondaries configured for a 4-ohm load—the Sashas became sonically and musically unignorable. Leonard Cohen's Live in London (CD/AIFF, Columbia 88697405022) suddenly took on the physical and emotional presence I'd heard through the Sophias at their best. And in the Kyrie of Beethoven's Missa Solemnis, with Otto Klemperer and the New Philharmonia Orchestra and Chorus (LP, Angel SB-3679), the voices of Elisabeth Söderström and Martti Talvela were freed from the flammes of storage to glide, realistically, over the orchestral storm.

From that day forward the Sasha distinguished itself as an open-sounding and exceptionally wide-bandwidth loudspeaker much like the Sophia Series 2. Yet whereas the two Wilson models sounded superficially alike overall, the Sasha W/P distinguished itself as a device of greater clarity and resolving power. Months before, the Sophia had surprised me by bringing unexpected timbral color and texture to the world of high-end speakers, as well as degrees of nuance and dramatic contrast that, while not in the same league as those of a very good horn, were well above the norm for a speaker designed to be kept away from room boundaries. The Sasha retained those strengths, yet rewarded careful listening with deeper levels of sonic detail, virtually throughout the audioband, and a sense that I was hearing more musical, artistic nuance. As with all of the truly great loudspeakers I've heard—perhaps a dozen in all—the Sasha W/P didn't sound as if it

tical plane (fig.6), a small suckout develops in the upper crossover region for listening axes below that Art used for his auditioning, while the same region gets a little peaky if you sit on or above the tweeter axis. Again, the wide range of inter-cabinet spikes supplied by Wilson, in combination with the detailed setup information, will allow the speaker's in-room balance to be optimized for a wide range of listener ear heights and listening distances.

On my way home from the 2010 Salon Son et Image in Montreal, I visited Art Dudley in upstate New York to pick up the Sashas for measurement chez Atkinson. Before packing up the Wilsons, I took advantage of the opportunity to perform my usual spatially averaged in-room response with the speakers driven by Art's preferred Shindo tube monoblocks. The result is shown as the red trace in fig.7. The highs are well extended, though with an excess of energy at the top of the midrange. As I said earlier, whether this will be heard as an excess, or whether the listener's ears will instead latch on to the relative lack of energy in the mid-treble, will very much depend on the recording played. The low frequencies are also well extended, with useful output evident to below 25 Hz. However, there is also a lack of energy apparent in the lower midrange. I suspect this is due to the Allison Effect, in which reflections from the walls and floor cancel the direct sound. With the Sashas set up in AD's room, the distances of each midrange unit from the adjacent wall and the floor were very similar, meaning that the effect of each reflection will be coincident in the frequency domain. Against this measured effect must be set the fact that the presence of such reflections is something the ear learns and can compensate for, at least to some extent.

The blue trace in fig.7 shows the in-room response of Art's reference Audio Note speakers, which he places in the room's corners with an extreme amount of toe-in. The corner placement gives rise to a more lumpy bass response than the Wilsons', which were 5' or so in front of the wall behind them.
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were actively beaming more information my way; rather, my impression was of a product that did a better-than-average job of staying out of my way so I could hear those details unfold of their own accord.

The effect was less cerebral and more earthly than you might think, especially with recordings known for combining clean sound with good amounts of flesh and blood. To hear what I mean, try the magnificent 1958 recording of Smetana's Má Vlast with Rafael Kubelik and the Vienna Philharmonic, still available on vinyl in a fine reissue (LP, Decca/Speakers Corner SXL 2064/5). This recording is a bit drier and more immediate than most Deccas of the period, yet with really luscious string color and texture, and a fine, tactile way with such transient sounds as in the many harp arpeggios. (It's also a brilliant reading by world-class musicians—the sort of thing Decca could boast with greater consistency than any other classical label save, perhaps, Harmonia Mundi.) Hearing that recording through those speakers bordered on the psychedelic: Every time I tried it—and I tried it many times during the Sashas' stay—it was less a listening session than a listening experience. The Wilsons seemed to present the beautiful, emotional truth of those two LPs better than any speaker I've heard.

Accomplished though the Sashas were, I wasn't so much amazed by their spatial performance—their ability to suggest the physical presence of performers on a stage of believable size and depth—as by the way those strengths seemed inseparable from the speakers' more musical strengths, such as their excellent melodic flow and surprisingly good sense of scale overall. Why surprising? Because loudspeakers designed for good stereo imaging usually sound too airy and fuzzy and precise to have any believable sense of scale at all. I can think of no better excuse for great stereo imaging than great stereo opera recordings, one of the finest being the late-1960s recording of Cavalli's L'Ormindo, with Raymond Leppard conducting the London Philharmonic (LP, Argo ZNF 8-10). The Sashas captured the soloists' movements and their sheer physicality so well that other aspects of the performance, including the dramatic nuances of the singers, seemed enhanced as well.

For all their resolution of detail, all their spatial prowess, and all their sense of scale, the Sashas were voice-lovers' speakers. Not only were voices uncolored, and unburdened with strain or texture that wasn't there in the first place, but singing had nuance. It had humanness. And again, the W/Ps' fine, musically integrated spatial performance made Joanna Newsom, Nicolai Gedda, Don Van Vliet, and the French Radio and Television Chorus sound there.

As much as I dislike reviews in which the musical whole is sacrificed in order to
concentrate on distinct sonic fragments, an exception is required to accommodate the Sasha's deep-bass performance. Earlier Wilson loudspeakers—the WITT comes to mind, as well as certain versions of the WATT/Puppy itself—struck me as having not only excess bass but excessively smooth, timbrally untextured bass as well. From what I've heard from more recent Wilson products, beginning with the WATT/Puppy 7, the company has made great progress in achieving a realistically leaner and more textured bass sound, while mostly retaining the meat and the color that belong there, and that other makers of supposedly high-performance loudspeakers usually miss altogether.

In English: The Sasha W/P made glorious bass in my room. Even the orchestral bass drum in Sir Adrian Boult and the London Philharmonic's recording of Elgar's The Dream of Gerontius (LP, EMI SLS 987), and the electric-bass pedals in “The Lamia” and other selections from Genesis's The Lamb Lies Down on Broadway (LP, Atco SD 2-401), were proportioned well to the rest of the spectrum, free of excess loudness and overhang. Indeed, the bass drum in Benjamin Britten's Sinfonia da Requiem, played by André Previn and the London Symphony (LP, EMI ASD 3154), surprised me by sounding deeper—and bigger, and more physical—through my Audio Note AN-E speakers, almost certainly because the smaller, corner-mounted Audio Notes load the room in a very different manner.

That in itself raises an interesting subject: Whereas the Sophia 2 surprised me by sounding great with virtually every amplifier on hand, the Sasha W/P unsurprised me by drawing the line at the 25W Shindo Haut-Charlemagne. That pairing was magnificent: textured, colorful, musical, physical, and convincing. But with the 20Wpc Shindo Haut-Brion, a measure of the Sasha's bass openness and neutrality was lost—probably a function of the Shindo's dedicated 16-ohm output secondary failing to work with the Sasha's minimum impedance—and large-scale music lacked poise.

The Sashas did fine things with more power. Driven by the big Electrocompaniet AW400s, the Wilsons were better at communicating the notion of force: not in a gross, stupid way, but subtly. Brass instruments had a marvelous color that belong there, and that other makers of supposedly high-performance loudspeakers usually miss altogether. The Sashas did fine things with more power, but what sort of praise is that, to commend someone by listing the sins he didn't commit?

Over the years, I've become adept at dealing with certain sorts of performance flaws—not by ignoring them but by accepting them more thoughtfully (I would hope). And, rightly or not, coincidentally, every amplifier on hand, the Sasha W/P was just as musical in its own way—just as emotive, if not quite as stirring and dramatic with the amps I love, than with those 25W Shindos!

**Conclusions**

Most other loudspeakers of my experience have been easier to describe, arguably because they embodied flaws that the Sasha W/P does not. But what sort or not, I admit that I've progressed to where, in exchange for exceptional performance in certain regards, I virtually expect a certain amount of failure in others. An example: I thoroughly love my Audio Note AN-E speakers, corner mounting and cupped-hands colorations on voices and all, because they are so superior to most speakers I've had at home in their punch and emotiveness, and in their ability to be that way with so little amplifier power. They're wonderful things, and I'll surely always recommend them.

**THE WILSONS WERE BETTER AT COMMUNICATING THE NOTION OF FORCE: NOT IN A GROSS, STUPID, OBVIOUS WAY, BUT SUBTLY.**
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- What HiFi Group Test Winner, February 2009

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Focal Maestro Utopia III
LOUDSPEAKER

Considering that the crates they're shipped in are each as large as a Manhattan studio apartment, once they'd been set up in my listening room, Focal's Maestro Utopia III speakers weren't as visually overpowering as I'd anticipated. The elegant dark-gloss front baffles, the gloss-gray side panels, and the fact that the speaker's three subenclosures are vertically arrayed so that the top, midrange section is angled down, significantly reduced their apparent size.
But I'm getting ahead of myself. Following a series of mininonitor reviews in 2009, I had decided to live for a while with floorstanders aimed at the state of the art. Not that I'm unappreciative of what small speakers can achieve for a relatively modest price, but my experience with the superb Revel Ultima Salon2 ($22,000/pair, see www.stereophile.com/ floorloudspeakers/608revel) had whetted my appetite for what could be achieved when the designer wasn't quite so concerned with counting pennies for parts. The first model I auditioned was Aerial Acoustics' 20T V2 ($32,000/pair), which I enthusiastically reviewed in the November 2009 Stereophile (see www.stereophile.com/ floorloudspeakers/aerial_acoustics_20t_v2_loudspeaker). The Aerials were replaced by the subject of this review, the Maestro Utopias ($49,995/pair), from French manufacturer Focal—and which, my listening room. Even though I maneuvered one of the Maestros as far as I could from the sidewalls and fired it along one of the room's diagonals, in order to push back room reflections as far as possible in time after the arrival of the speaker's direct sound at the microphone, the results don't have as much resolution in the midrange as I would have liked, or as I routinely achieve with smaller speakers, with which I can optimize the test setup. As usual, I used DRA Labs' MLSSA system and a calibrated DPA 4006 microphone for the farfield responses, and an Earthworks QTC-40 for the nearfield and spatially averaged room responses.

I examined the Maestro Utopia's electrical impedance and phase with both an Audio Precision System One, which uses swept spot tones, and MLSSA, which uses an MLS signal and FFT analysis. I used two different systems and measured both speakers because the Focal's impedance was idiosyncratic in the upper-bass region, and I wanted to be sure that I was characterizing it correctly. Fig.1 shows the impedance and electrical phase with the speaker's three tone-control jumpers in their boost ("3") and cut ("1") positions. Position "3" gave the lowest impedance in the mid-high treble, and the highest impedance in the low-treble and bass regions, but the impedance wasn't significantly affected by the jumpers in the region of special interest, between 60 and 300Hz. The magnitude lies below 4 ohms in this region, with a plunge to just 1.7 ohms at 111Hz rather than the specified minimum of 3 ohms.

**Focal Maestro Utopia III**

Although a large speaker, at a hair under 5' tall and weighing 256 lbs, the Maestro is actually the third model from the top of Focal's Utopia III line. Pride of place goes to the awe-inspiring four-way, five-driver, five-enclosure, 80"-tall, 573-lb Grande Utopia III EM ($180,000/pair), which powers its 16" woofer with a field-coil-energized electromagnet. The smaller, three-way, four-enclosure Stella Utopia III EM also uses an electromagnetic woofer, by contrast, the Maestro Utopia has two conventional, permanent-magnet-energized woofers, though each is differently loaded, to result in a "three-and-a-half-way" design.

Like all the models in the Utopia III line, the Maestro's high frequencies are handled by a 1.1" (27mm) inverted-dome tweeter, its diaphragm formed from beryllium foil. This element offers an almost ideal combination of low mass—its density is 40% that of titanium—and very high stiffness, allowing a tweeter made from it to operate in pure pistonic mode.

The "accordion pleats" aim the subenclosures at the listener.
to a frequency well above the audioband. However, it is difficult to work, and the dust is poisonous; how Focal forms this material into tweeter diaphragms is proprietary. But the material is only half the story. The Utopia III tweeter features Focal’s Infinite Acoustic Loading (IAL) technology, whereby the rear of the diaphragm is left open and loaded by a tuned cavity. This allows the drive-units resonant frequency to be reduced to 580Hz, two octaves below its passband.

Both the Maestro’s 6.5” midrange unit and its two 11” woofers have cones made from a material Focal calls W. This is a sandwich of aircraft-grade foam and glass fiber, the latter impregnated with a bonding agent. The result, Focal claims, is a cone that is very light and very stiff, but with a high degree of self-damping. Again, this should endow the cones with excellent pistonic behavior within their passbands, and because Focal makes its own drive-units, it can tailor the physical properties of each W cone for its eventual use as a midrange unit, woofer, or a combination of the two, using a laser to cut each cone to the optimal shape. The woofers have hefty half-roll rubber surrounds and large-diameter, inverted, black dustcaps; the midrange unit doesn’t have a dustcap, but its magnet pole-piece is capped with an inverted black molding resembling the profile of the tweeter. Externally, the two woofers look identical, but the lower one uses a 50mm voice-coil, the upper one a 40mm-diameter coil. The lower woofer also uses a “double-ferrite” magnet. The midrange drive-unit has a circular array of small magnets rather than a single large one. Focal calls this array the Power Flower, from its resemblance to the petals of a flower, and claims it reduces nonlinearities in the magnetic drive and minimizes flux leakage.

**FOCAL MAESTRO UTOPIA III**

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1 Once the beryllium is formed into a tweeter diaphragm, there is no danger. Focal’s manual does include a section on how to seal and return the speaker if the tweeter is damaged in any way.

This makes the Maestro Utopia III a distinctly schizophrenic load for the partnering amplifier: very difficult for any amp to drive in the upper bass, but very amplifier-friendly in the upper midrange and treble. It is a good thing, therefore, that the Focal is very sensitive, playing very loud with only a few watts of power. My estimate of its voltage sensitivity on its tweeter axis was 92.6dB/(2.83V/m), which is within experimental error of the specified 93dB.

The traces in fig.1 are from slight discontinuities that would suggest the presence of cabinet resonances of some kind. Listening to the walls of the midrange and woofer enclosures with a stethoscope while I played the half-step-spaced toneburst track from Editor’s Choice (CD, Stereophile STPH016-2), I heard no undue emphasis in the midrange, other than a slight liveliness from both the midrange and woofer enclosures at around 275Hz.

The rather complicated set of traces to the left of fig.2 shows the outputs of the three lower-frequency drive-units and the port, measured in the nearfield and scaled in the ratio of their radiating diameters. The midrange unit (green trace) crosses over to the upper woofer (blue) at around 150Hz, the latter rolling off with a relatively shallow slope. The lower woofer (purple) peaks a little lower in frequency than the upper, with a much steeper low-pass rollout. Particularly, though the large, downfiring port loads the lower woofer’s subenclosure, it is the upper woofer that has a better-defined minimum-motion notch in its response, at 28Hz, which is a little lower in frequency than predicted by the speaker’s impedance graph. The port’s output (red) peaks in the midbass and rolls off rapidly above that region. The black trace below 300Hz in fig.2 shows the complex sum of the individual nearfield outputs. The broad boost in the upper bass will be partly due to the nearfield measurement technique, which assumes that the radiators are housed on the face of an infinite plane; in true anechoic conditions the Maestro Utopia’s low frequencies will extend down to the port tuning frequency, where it will be down by 6dB. Higher in frequency in fig.2, the Maestro’s balance on the tweeter axis is basically flat, though with small peaks balanced by small dips and extending at full level out to the 30kHz limit of the graph. This measurement was taken with all the midrange and treble drivers in the “3” position. Changing the treble jumper to “2” shelves down the speaker’s output above 3kHz by 1dB; the “1” position drops that region by another dB. The midrange jumper also gives a 1–2dB reduction in level, but covering just the octave between 2 and 4kHz.

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**BOTH THE MAESTRO’S 6.5” MIDRANGE UNIT AND ITS TWO 11” WOOFERS HAVE CONES MADE FROM A MATERIAL FOCAL CALLS W. THIS IS A SANDWICH OF AIRCRAFT-GRADE FOAM AND GLASS FIBER.**

As you can see from the photographs, the Maestro Utopia’s enclosure is complex, comprising three subenclosures joined by angled inserts. This gives the system, when viewed from the side, a faint resemblance to an accordion. While
the central tweeter cabinet fires straight ahead, the accordion pleats aim the top, midrange enclosure down toward the listener. The baffle of the subenclosure housing the two woofers is tilted back a little to complement the midrange enclosure's downward tilt. The massively constructed woofer enclosure is built up of sheets of MDF up to 2" thick; viewed from above, the side panels of all three subenclosures gracefully curve and taper toward the rear of the speaker.

The differences between the two woofers are made clear by the Maestro's internal construction (see p.86). The upper woofer is loaded by a trapezoidal sealed compartment, though this does have a pressure-relief system in the form of two arrays of small holes drilled through the partition between it and the larger compartment that loads the lower woofer. This vents to the outside world through a little to complement the midrange enclosure down toward the subenclosures gracefully curve and taper toward the rear of the speaker.

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merely thought they might work best, the Maestros sounded excellent. The fine-tuning was just that: fine tuning.

A circular, black grille is supplied for each driver, the one for the tweeter is magnetically attached. MacArthur felt the speakers sounded best with grilles removed. Having declared himself satisfied with the placement of the speakers and the jumper settings, he then fitted the carpet-piercing spikes, packed up his tools, and drove back to the airport, leaving me to live with the Maestro Utopia IIIIs. After my experience with the Focal 1007 Be to sound brilliant; by contrast, the Maestro Utopia was, if anything, a little on the mellower side, even polite. Not that it sounded uninviting, but instead of thrusting the music forward at me, it was more as if it were inviting me to hear into the music.

It took me a while to appreciate that, whereas some speakers are tailored to have a tonal imbalance that results in a polite sound, the Maestro Utopia III's decorum was due to the absence of things that speakers usually do wrong.
whereas some speakers are tailored to have a tonal imbalance that results in a polite sound, the Maestro Utopia III's decorum was due to the absence of things that speakers usually do wrong. The big Focal didn't lack energy in any specific frequency region; instead, it lacked cone breakup modes in woofers and midranges, resonances in cabinets, and distortions of all kinds. The speaker sounded smooth, yet without smearing or covering up recorded detail. The subtle touch of extra reverberation I had added with a Lexicon unit to the sound of Jerome Harris's direct-injected bass guitar in "Hand by Hand," from his Quintet's Rendezvous (CD, Stereophile STPH013-2), was as clear as I had hoped it would be, and a little more obvious than I might have wished.

I had wondered about the Maestro Utopias' imaging, given the fact that the tweeter is set within a wide baffle, though this does have a slightly convex curve. I shouldn't have been concerned. The dual-mono pink-noise track from Editor's Choice (CD, Stereophile STPH016-2) was reproduced as it should be: as a very narrow spot of sound midway between the speakers, without any splashing to the sides at any frequencies. The instruments on Rendezvous were stably placed in space precisely where I had mixed them to be, with excellent image depth where appropriate.

Ian MacArthur had left the Maestros' tweeter jumpers in their neutral, "2" positions. Long-term, I preferred the balance with them set to "3," which took away most of the mellow top-octave quality. But, my goodness, this is one smooth tweeter, rivaled perhaps only by the Revel's beryllium dome. (I haven't heard the B&W diamond tweeter under familiar circumstances.) The Focal tweeter loved the sounds of cymbals, maximally differentiating among the various instruments used by drummer Billy Drummond on Rendezvous. For example, too often with less-aristocratic tweeters, the ride cymbal Drummond softly brushes throughout the first time through the verse on "The Mooche" sounds more like white noise. The Focal's inverted beryllium dome preserved the cymbal's changing texture, yet without pushing that character forward at me.

At the other end of the spectrum, a consistent factor in my auditioning was how well articulated bass guitars sounded. Jerome Harris's solo in "Hand by Hand," from Rendezvous, was reproduced by the Focals with no undue emphasis or lack of same of any of the notes played—other than that intended by the performer, of course. In-room low-frequency extension, judged using the warble tones on Editor's Choice, was good to 25Hz, though the 20Hz band was inaudible. The lowest notes on my new reference for pipe-organ sound, Melanie Barney with the Buzz Brass Ensemble performing Holst's Planets (CD, Fidelio FACD028), which I was given at SSI, didn't quite have the magnificence that they had with the Aerial 20T V2s, but nevertheless provided a satisfying foundation to the music. The Focal's woofers seemed tuned for clarity and articulation rather than for delivering the ultimate amount of low-frequency energy into the room. I ended up with the bass jumpers in their "3" positions, to add a touch more midbass energy.

A CD that has been in heavy rotation since I returned from the 2010 Salon Son et Image at the end of March is an EP from the Montreal show's featured artist, the band Give (see www.giveband.ca and http://blog.stereophile.com/ssi2010/oh_caroline). Recorded at Studio Reference in St. Caliste, Quebec, the four songs on this CD, titled SSI, epitomize what can be produced with a modern rock recording without having to resort to massive amounts of make-it-loud compression or in your-face equalization. The bass player uses a five-string instrument on the final song, "Mouths," and while every note was reproduced with impressive clarity and good weight, this recording did reveal that there was a slight touch of extra warmth in the Maestro's upper bass. This made the bass guitar sound just a bit larger than life. Not that—speaking as a bass guitarist—there's anything wrong with that. This character did seem somewhat amplifier-dependent. It was more noticeable with the Siaudio Moon

ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

DIGITAL SOURCES
Ayre C-5xe universal player; Siaudio Moon Evolution 750D CD player; dCS Puccini SACD player & USB-input D/A converter with Apple Mac mini for media storage.

PREAMPLIFIER
Siaudio Moon Evolution P-8.

POWER AMPLIFIERS
Classé CTM-600 monoblocks, Siaudio Moon Evolution W-7.

LOUDSPEAKERS
Aerial Acoustics 20T V2.

CABLES

ACCESSORIES
Target TT-5 equipment racks; Ayre Myrtle Blocks; ASC Tube Traps, RPG Abbfusor panels; Shunyata Research Dark Field cable elevators; PS Audio Power Plant 300 at 90Hz (preamp, CD players other than Ayre), Audio Power Industries 116 Mk.II & PE-1, APC S-15 AC line conditioners (not power amps). AC power comes from two dedicated 20A circuits, each just 6' from the breaker box.

—John Atkinson
Evolution W-7 that I've long used as a reference power amplifier than it was with the Classé CTM-600 monoblocks that arrived halfway through my time with the Focals (review to appear in the fall). More important, with the otherwise excellent Simaudio amp, the speakers didn't offer the unrestricted dynamics I'd expected. The highly sensitive Maestro Utopia III wouldn't, at least in theory, need a high-powered amplifier to play loud. Yet the 150Wpc Simaudio was clearly being asked for more than it could deliver.

I was reminded by the passage in Tony Bramwell's autobiography, Magical Mystery Tours: My Life with the Beatles (Robson Books, 2005), about his experience as a record promoter working on Jennifer Warnes' tribute to Leonard Cohen, Famous Blue Raincoat, that it had been too long since I had listened to that superbly crafted album (CD, Private Music PVT2092). With the W-7 driving the Focals, I turned up the wick on the opener, "First We Take Manhattan." Hmm. Yes, Warnes' singing sounded as coherent, as focused, and as artful as I knew it should; Roscoe Beck's bass guitar was beautifully articulate and solidly reproduced; and the stereo stage was wide, deep, and stable—but the sound didn't want to give as much as I was expecting. It was just too damnably restrained. Similarly with classical music, where orchestral climaxes just didn't climax as much I wished or had expected them to. I want—no, I need the glorious encore of the theme of Thor's swinging hammer at the closing of Sibelius's Symphony 5, in the performance by Vladimir Ashkenazy and the Philharmonia Orchestra (CD, Decca 410-016-2), to raise me to my feet in joy; but that just wasn't happening with the Moon amplifier driving the Focals the way it had done with the same amp driving the Revel Salons2.

The last thing you'd expect would be English reserve from a French loudspeaker, but that was what I was getting with the Simaudio. Changing from AudioQuest's Kilimanjaro speaker cables, which I've used for many years, to AudioQuest's new Wild didn't resolve the issue (though it did add to the Maestro's already-excellent presentation of midrange detail). It wasn't until the 600W Classé amplifiers took up residence in the system that I felt the Maestro Utopias were really giving me the dynamics they had promised all along.

Which allowed me to concentrate on and appreciate what the Focals excelled at: the midrange. With rock recordings that are typically hot in the midband—Joni's Mitchell's otherwise excellent Shadows and Light (HDCD, Asylum 704-2), for example—I set the Maestro's midrange jumpers to "1" to take away some of the bite. But voices on well-recorded albums soared and sang. A secret pleasure of mine is the American Songbook stylings of Jane Monheit. The Maestros reproduced without flaw her reading of Joni Mitchell's "A Case of You," from Come Dream With Me (CD, Warlock 4219), the small inflections of pitch in her voice unobscured by loudspeaker anomalies or overlaid with colorations. The same was true for Give's Caroline St. Louis: her small vocal decorations and grace notes, her tasteful use of vibrato to point a phrase, were superbly well differentiated.

Male voices were treated with the same equanimity. I finished my formal auditioning of the Maestro Utopia IIs with May's "Recording of the Month," Johnny Cash's American VI: Ain't No Grave (CD, Lost Highways/American Recordings B0013954-02). The life lived and the damage done are evident in every note this great American singer sings on this album, and the pitch differentiation offered by the Maestro Utopia, all too often smeared and homogenized by lesser speakers, was presented in full measure. This is high fidelity.

**Utopia**

There are loudspeakers that thrust their virtues forward at you. By contrast, the Focal Maestro Utopia III invites the listener into what it has to offer. Its balance is a little warm in the upper bass in absolute terms, and a touch mellow in the top octave, but the Maestro Utopia is otherwise an intensely musical-sounding loudspeaker, with smooth, uncolored mids, tight, controlled lows, stable, well-defined soundstaging, and superb dynamic-range capability. However, it demands to be used with amplifiers unfazed by its wicked load impedance in the upper bass. The Classé monoblocks proved a superb match, and I imagine the Musical Fidelity Titan that resides in Michael Fremers man cave would also work a treat with these speakers.

With that caveat, and with an acknowledgment to the fact that this is a very expensive loudspeaker, I give the beautifully finished and engineered Focal Maestro Utopia III my highest recommendation.
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Marantz SA-KI-Pearl
SACD/CD PLAYER

DESCRIPTION

DIMENSIONS
17.3" (440mm) W by 5" (127mm) H by 16.5" (419mm) D. Weight: 32 lbs (14.5kg).

SERIAL NUMBER OF UNIT REVIEWED
200093200057
PRICE
$2999.99

APPROXIMATE NUMBER OF DEALERS
100

MANUFACTURER
Marantz America, Inc., 100 Corporate Drive, Mahwah, NJ 07430-2041. Tel: (201) 762-6500. Fax: (201) 762-6670. Web: http://us.marantz.com.

In my review in the February 2009 issue of Marantz's SA-11S2 SACD/CD player ($3599.99), I said that “buying [an SACD] player in 2009 necessitates an act of faith similar to the one turntable buyers faced back in 1992.” The negative reaction to this from the besieged SACD community was as intense as it was irrational. If they're angry with me, I can only imagine how they feel about Stanley Lipshitz and John Vanderkooy, who presented a white paper at a 2001 Audio Engineering Society convention that claimed to prove that SACD doesn’t qualify as a high-fidelity format. How many figurative bags of flaming poop did they leave at their front doors?

Some on the SACD forum (www.sa-cd.net) actually tried to argue my point, but it's a fact: Despite the best efforts of companies like Mobile Fidelity Sound Lab and Analogue Productions, unless you already own a considerable collection of SACDs, your choice of new rock titles is limited. While both of those audiophile-oriented companies have reissued eclectic lists of excellent titles on hybrid SACD/1

CDs, no new rock has been issued on SACD for years. The last disc I can recall seeing (and buying) was Death Cab for Cutie's 2003 album, Transatlanticism (Barsuk Bark 32sa), mastered from the original analog master tape.

Hundreds, if not thousands, of new indie-rock titles are being issued on vinyl today, including some that are extremely well recorded and would make excellent SACDs—Sufjan Stevens' orchestral suite The BQE, for instance. Meanwhile, the flood of vinyl reissues continues, much to even my astonishment.

But, believe it or not, I'm not here to sing vinyl's praises. If you listen to mostly classical music, your choices of new, superb-sounding SACD recordings are vast, ranging from the most popular orchestral works to the most challenging and esoteric, many recorded in surround sound. Speaking of esoteric, for about $900 you can even buy Sir Georg Solti's justly famous London/Decca recording of Wagner's Ring with the Vienna Philharmonic, reissued on 14 SACD/CDs by Esoteric, maker of SACD players and transports. New classical recordings on vinyl are few and far between.

So, for those who already own large collections of rock, jazz, and classical SACDs (that's me), and for those interested in new classical titles (that's me), Marantz Europe last year celebrated its 30-year association with audio engineer Ken Ishiwata by issuing the Reference SA-KI-Pearl SACD player, production limited to only 500 units, to accompany the Reference PM-KI-Pearl integrated amplifier I reviewed in the April 2010 issue.

Another Pearl from Ken?
Like the SA-KI-Pearl integrated amp-
Marantz's SA-KI-Pearl SACD player ($2999.99) starts with a carefully constructed, well-damped chassis made using a large, specially constructed copper-plating bath, to produce a constant thickness of plating said to result in reduced ground impedances and eddy currents—which, theoretically, means less noise.

The chassis is braced with an additional heavy bottom plate and topped with a 5mm-thick aluminum cover. Copper encases and shields a newly designed toroidal transformer, and the 32-lb Pearl sits on specially machined aluminum feet. “You’d be shocked by how much those mechanical differences can contribute to better sound!” Ken Ishiwata told me. Actually, I wouldn’t.

Hand-selected components enhance Marantz’s HDAM-SA2 and HDAM-SA amplifier modules. The power supply uses high-speed Schottky diodes and the same storage capacitor as in Marantz’s flagship SACD player. The DAC is Cirrus Logic’s CS4398, a 24-bit/192kHz device that also includes a DSD processor that doesn’t decimate the datastream, while maintaining DSD’s native sampling rate of 2.8224MHz.

A look inside the Pearl reveals a quality of construction that’s almost opulent, given the reasonable price of $3000. The exterior build quality—including a copper-plated rear panel with a pair of machined-brass RCA jack outputs, coaxial and TosLink digital outputs, and TosLink digital input—is equally impressive, as are the front panel’s clean layout and design; and the two vertical stripes of blue LEDs add a dramatic flair.

Features

The SA-KI-Pearl’s default playback mode is SACD, but you can switch to the CD layer—and, of course, it plays standard CDs, as well as data discs containing Windows media files and MP3s. Its optical digital input will decode datastreams up to 24/96, assuming you have a TosLink-equipped source (such as a recent Macintosh computer). Of greater use to many will be the Pearl’s ¼” headphone jack, which connects to an internal high-current headphone amp with discrete volume control. Two digital filter settings are available for both SACD and CD playback. Filter 1, the default for SACDs and CDs, does nothing in SACD mode. Filter 2 seemed to be a level booster. In CD mode, Filter 1 provides a slow, asymmetrical ultrasonic rolloff, while Filter 2 provides a sharp asymmetrical rolloff.

Whatever the measured differences, I could hear no differences between the two filters in CD mode. I left the SACD mode set to Filter 1.
The supplied remote control is well laid out and easy to use, but it's not back-lit, and it includes a number of function buttons not applicable to the SA-KI-Pearl— including one, labeled Phase Inverter (absolute polarity), that I wish did work. But given Ishiwata's "purist" intent and the Pearl's single-ended circuits, adding polarity inversion would most likely compromise the player's sound. The omission makes sense.

The $3000 SA-KI-Pearl seems to offer less than the $3600 SA-11S2 SACD player I reviewed last year: single-ended outputs only, vs the SA-11S2's choice of fully balanced or single-ended; a Xyron vs aluminum disc tray; Cirrus's all-in-one DAC chip vs two monophonic Seiko DSD DACs; the omission of phase inversion; and other things the SA-11S2 has and the Pearl doesn't. Of course, only one thing is truly important: Which sounds better?

Listening to SACD

On the KI-Pearl section of the Marantz Europe website (www.marantz.eu/kipearl/), Ken Ishiwata writes, "As with amplifiers, you cannot judge a CD player by analyzing its specifications." Ain't that the truth? Well, my own experience tells me it is, though the folks led around by measurements, who think that humans are basically repositories of unreliable perceptions based on defective senses, will never be convinced otherwise.

I feel sorry for such people—like the reader who recently suggested that I heard differences between two amplifiers that measured similarly because I was "in a bad mood." Right. For two months? When I look down a long stretch of railroad track, I know the two rails don't come to a point, even though they look as if they do. I've filed that fact away in my personal database, and somehow, each time I board a train, I remember it. So I don't panic.

The Pearl was also free of the SA-11S2's slightly syrupy overlay, which produced a warm, rich, relaxed tonal balance and an attack character that was "a bit soft and almost tube-like." Instead, the Pearl was refreshingly lighter, tighter, and faster, and definitely more involving.

But however the SA-KI-Pearl measures, it definitely did not sound the same as the SA-11S2. The Pearl produced a far more involving, lively, detailed sound. Though its transient performance was faster and cleaner, it managed to be just as free of grain and etch as the SA-11S2, which seemed to achieve that desirable result by softening and warming the sound.

KEN ISHIWATA WRITES, "AS WITH AMPLIFIERS, YOU CANNOT JUDGE A CD PLAYER BY ANALYZING ITS SPECIFICATIONS."

The resolution of around 18.5 bits. At low frequencies, the supply-related spurious are more clearly seen, and are a little higher in the left channel than in the right. SACD playback of the same signal gave the middle traces in fig.2: the rise in the noise floor above 2kHz is most likely due to ultrasonic noise from the DSD encoding leaking past the bandpass filter's skirts.

Repeating the analysis with 16- and 24-bit data but using a narrowband FFT technique gave the traces in fig.3. Again, the increase in bit depth drops the noise floor by around 15dB, unmasking higher-frequency power-supply components, but these are all at or below -134dBFS, which in terms of quietness approaches the roots of the universe. Fig.4 shows the supply-related spurious below 1kHz while the player decoded a 1kHz tone from SACD. The noise components at 60Hz and its odd multiples are most likely due to magnetic interference from the player's AC transformer, those at 120Hz and its multiples will be due to grounding issues. Again the left channel is slightly worse than the right, but again it is fair to note that none of this behavior will be audible. I suspect that the presence of the 120Hz-related spurious may be due to Marantz's decision to use a two-pronged AC cord without a ground.

Linearity error with CD data (not shown) was negligible to below -105dBFS, and with its low noise floor,
Not surprisingly, the SA-KI-Pearl’s perceived resolution and especially its transparency, appeared to be far greater. I returned to the reference tracks I’d used for the SA-11S2 review: The Pearl delivered “Rainy Day Women #12 & 35,” from Bob Dylan’s Blonde on Blonde (SACD, Columbia), with far greater clarity and resolution, beginning with the opening syncopated drums—which, while still sounding appropriately deep and resonant, were less lumpy and thick, and were easily placed and separated within an acoustic space instead of blending into one another. Dylan’s voice stepped forward of the instrumental mix and, because it now sounded less muffled and thick, was more convincing and of a more appropriate size. Instead of sounding merely pleasant, the recording was now more visually enticing without becoming overdetailed.

The SACD of the Bill Cunliffe Trio’s Live at Bernie’s (Groove Note GRV1009-3) also sounded cleaner, faster, and more exciting, in great part because of the piano’s faster, cleaner percussive attack and the improved shimmer of the cymbals. The disc had greater soundstage focus, and with the drum kit splayed across the soundstage, the visual excitement was greatly enhanced, as was the artificiality of the spatial presentation. Groove Note has recently issued on SACD/CD its excellent original recording of the Jung Trio’s performance of Dvorák’s Piano Trio 3 in F Minor, Op.65 (GRV1043-3). Previously available only on 45rpm vinyl, it’s one of the few new classical music performances recorded live to analog tape (at 30ips). That it hasn’t sold well on vinyl, according to the producers, is pitiful—the recording is gorgeous, and the playing by this award-winning trio of sisters does for chamber music what the Everly Brothers did for vocal harmonizing. These gals are locked in.

The SACD wasn’t available for my review of the SA-S11S2, but you can be sure that its warm mix of violin, cello, and piano, recorded not in a dry recording studio but in a hall, will pose a challenge to any audio system. There’s no way the SA-S11S2 could have unraveled the merged lower-midband warmths of the piano and cello, or the piano’s attack and pizzicato strings, all of which the Pearl managed effectively.

The Marantz’s reproduction of an undithered 1kHz tone at exactly -90.31dBFS was well-nigh perfect, with the three DC voltage levels clearly and symmetrically resolved (fig.5). A very slight degree of DC offset is evident, at +25µV in the right channel and -25µV in the left. Again, these will be inconsequential. With DSD data at the same level, the result is a pretty good sinewave (fig.6).

The Marantz’s output stage offered low levels of harmonic distortion, even into the punishing 600 ohm load (fig.7), where it didn’t behave differently than with the high 100k ohm load (not shown). The two channels did differ slightly, in that while the subjectively innocuous second harmonic was predominant, it lay at just -112dB (0.00025%) in the left channel (blue trace), but at -94dB (0.002%) in the right. Both channels also had some fifth- and seventh-harmonic content apparent, though at -110dB (0.0003%) and -118dB (0.00012%), this will not affect the Pearl’s sound quality. While the Marantz offered very low levels of intermodulation distortion, even into 600 ohms—the difference tone at 1kHz resulting from a signal consisting of high-level tones at 19 and 20kHz lay at just -99dB (0.0011%)—its rejection of ultrasonic images for CD playback depended on the filter chosen. Filter 1, the default, allowed fairly strong images of the twin HF tones to leak past the filter’s stopband (fig.8), while the sharper Filter 2 almost eliminated these images (fig.9).

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**Fig.7** Marantz SA-KI-Pearl, spectrum of 50Hz sinewave at 0dBFS into 600 ohms, 24-bit data (left channel blue, right red; linear frequency scale).

**Fig.8** Marantz SA-KI-Pearl, HF intermodulation spectrum, Filter 1, 19+20kHz at 0dBFS peak into 100k ohms, 24-bit data (left channel blue, right red; linear frequency scale).
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The Police’s *Every Breath You Take* (SACD, A&M Chronicles), a collection of their hits, just didn’t cut it through the SA-11S2: Stewart Copeland’s cymbals didn’t sizzle as they should, and the kick drum sounded soft and a bit flabby. The SA-KI-Pearl restored the sizzle and the bass drum’s pop, and the grit returned to the voice of the young Sting in those simple, spacious old recordings. I could turn the volume up and enjoy the natural sizzle and sheen because they were unaccompanied by grit or grain.

The cushion of air around Miles Davis’ trumpet on a reissue of *Steamin’ with the Miles Davis Quintet* (SACD, Prestige/Mobile Fidelity Sound Lab UDSACD 2019) was reminiscent of the original pressing, as was Paul Chambers’ nimble yet slightly overripe bass—that’s how they were recorded.

Tonally, spatially, and dynamically, the SA-KI-Pearl struck an inviting balance of speed of attack, resolution of detail, harmonic richness, and warmth. The player’s bottom end was well extended, controlled, and texturally expressive, its midband richly but not oppressively drawn, and its top octaves were airy, extended, and daringly pristine for the player’s reasonable price. Cymbals in particular were pinpoint clean, correctly sized, and free of artificial edge or added grain, thus obviating any need for a syrupy cover-up.

Even if you have an original LP pressing of The Band’s *Music from Big Pink*, and even if you don’t have an SACD player, MoFi’s hybrid reissue is a must-have (SACD/CD, Capitol/Mobile Fidelity Sound Lab). Mastering engineer Bob Ludwig recently told me that the bass below 80Hz was lopped off for the original LP pressing. When you hear this reissue with that low-end weight restored, you’ll know it. (MoFi’s 1980s vinyl reissue of *Big Pink* also got the bass right.) The Pearl did a credible job of decoding the considerable bass energy on this disc.

Peter Gabriel’s *So* (SACD, Geffen Chronicles 069 493 626-2) can sound downright nasty in the upper octaves through poorly designed gear, but softening and rolling off the top diminishes the intended crystalline impact. Correctly reproduced, it has plenty of bite, grit, and ice, but no sandpaper smear. The SA-11S2 softened the sound too much; the Pearl struck an ideal balance.

**Listening to CD**

Switching to “Red Book” CDs produced equally attractive results. Russian pianist Nikolai Demidenko’s *Live at Wigmore Hall*, recorded in 1993 by Ken Blair (CD, Hyperion CDD22024), surrounds an impressively well focused, properly sized, timbrally vibrant piano with a rich hall sound. Both transparency and clarity were impressive with the CD played on the Marantz.

Two years ago in Munich, someone generously gave me an autographed copy of *Visions*, a terrific CD by Hans Theessink and Terry Evans that features Richard Thompson on two tracks, and

---

**measurements, continued**

Finally, playing back the analytic J-Test signal from CD, the Marantz offered excellent rejection of jitter, though its noise floor looked more granular than the norm (fig.10). The jitter level, measured with the Miller Analyzer, was a very low 266 picoseconds peak–peak. The optical S/PDIF data input offered only mild rejection of word-clock jitter, however; when sourced from my PC via 15’ of plastic TosLink, the J-Test data gave rise to a jitter figure four times higher, 1.13 nanoseconds p–p, this almost entirely data-related (not shown).

The Marantz Reference SA-KI-Pearl’s measured performance reveals it to be a well-engineered SACD player, and better in some ways than the Marantz SA-11S2 Michael reviewed in February 2009. However, for best sound its Toslink input should not be used with jittery data sources.

—John Atkinson
ORTOFON RONDO  
BRONZE $1050

ORTOFON RONDO  
BLUE $800

ORTOFON RONDO  
RED $550

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STEREOPHILE

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MC A90 $4200

ORTOFON  
2M BLACK $569

ORTOFON  
2M BRONZE $389

ORTOFON  
2M RED $99

NEW ORTOFON  
Cadenza Black $2380

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Cadenza Bronze $1960

NEW ORTOFON  
Cadenza Blue $1540

NEW ORTOFON  
Cadenza Red $1120

NEW ORTOFON  
Cadenza Mono $1120

ORTOFON Salsa $375

ORTOFON Samba $265

ORTOFON Tango $225

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$400

ORTOFON MC-3  
TURBO $275

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ORTOFON X1-MC  
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Bo Diddley speaking on a third (LP/CD, Indie Europe/Zoom). It’s a rich, warm recording of mostly acoustic blues collaborations. The Pearl kept it warm, but never let it sink into the muck.

You don’t need an SACD player to hear the excellence of Alan Yoshida’s XRCD transfers of classic Blue Note albums, sumptuously presented by Bob Bantie’s Audiowave label. The Pearl delivered Sonny Clark’s Cool Struttin’ (CD, Blue Note/Audiowave AW/MXR-0003) with a fine balance of air, warmth, and detail. Art Farmer’s trumpet and Jackie McLean’s sax, both in the left channel, were timbrally vibrant and impressively airy and transparent, but without harshness. On the right, Philly Joe Jones’s drum kit sizzled and popped cleanly, and the pluck of Paul Chambers’ bass was well defined and harmonically complete. Even Clark’s piano, in the center, was cleanly rendered (engineer Rudy Van Gelder was having a good piano day!).

This record should sound spacious and cleanly rendered (engineer Rudy Van Gelder was having a good piano day!). This record should sound spacious and cleanly rendered (engineer Rudy Van Gelder was having a good piano day!). This record should sound spacious and cleanly rendered (engineer Rudy Van Gelder was having a good piano day!). This record should sound spacious and cleanly rendered (engineer Rudy Van Gelder was having a good piano day!).

The SA-KI-Pearl’s headphone jack is clearly no afterthought. I plugged in my AKG 701s and enjoyed the Marantz’s pristine, quiet performance. The Pearl is a complete headphone-based SACD/CD system, and, with its TosLink digital input, can decode your iTunes collection in style (assuming your computer has an optical digital output).

**Compared to What?**

As Ken Ishiwata said, “As with amplifiers, you cannot judge a CD player by analyzing its specifications.” For comparison’s sake, I retrieved the sample of the Playback Designs MPS-5 SACD/CD player that I reviewed in the February 2010 issue, which had sounded fantastastic but hadn’t measured so well (by conventional standards).

As good as the SA-KI-Pearl was, the Playback bettered it in every way—as it should for five times the price ($15,000)—and regardless of whatever the measurements show, which might just be that the Pearl measures better. The Playback sounded faster, tighter, more resolving, better extended, and more expressive, particularly on the bottom. It managed to pull more detail from every disc, with greater clarity and authority, despite John Atkinson’s measurements of its noise, which indicate that it doesn’t do better than 16-bit resolution. I have no explanation, other than to say that I was in a great mood while listening to both players—and, yes, I did match their output levels, and I did stare down the railroad track and see the rails come to a point (but I know—they really don’t).

**MARANTZ’S REFERENCE SA-KI-PEARL IS A BEAUTIFULLY BUILT, WELL-ENGINEERED SACD/CD PLAYER THAT OFFERS IMPRESSIVE MUSICAL BALANCE AND WELL-ROUNDED OVERALL PERFORMANCE.**

However, the contrast between the SA-11S2 and Cary Audio Design’s 306 Professional SACD player, to which I compared it, was far greater than the differences I heard between the Marantz SA-KI-Pearl and the Playback MPS-5. Although the SA-11S2 made poorly produced discs listenable, and sounded soft, warm, and relaxing, it was ultimately uninvolving—while the Cary was fast, taut, and exciting, with precise imaging. The SA-KI Pearl was much closer in spirit, if not in ultimate performance, to the Playback Designs MPS-5. Both players were fast, taut, exciting, and imaged precisely. The differences weren’t of overt personality but of degree. In short, I think the Marantz SA-KI-Pearl is a much more finely balanced, better-sounding player than the SA-11S2.

**Conclusion**

Marantz’s Reference SA-KI-Pearl is a beautifully built, well-engineered SACD/CD player that offers impressive musical balance and well-rounded overall performance. It’s like a finely mastered CD or LP—on hearing it, you’ll know that whoever was behind its final sound was an excellent listener and a passionate lover of music.

The Pearl does everything right and nothing wrong. It’s got nothing to hide, and doesn’t try. The many months I spent listening to it in the context of a very expensive system have convinced me that while a great deal more money can bring you additional performance—including greater dynamics, more visceral bottom-end slam, better resolution of detail, more transparency and air, and a range of other sonic enhancements around the edges of the performance envelope—the SA-KI-Pearl would be a credible performer in any system, regardless of cost. In a modest system, it will be the star.

Even were this edition not limited to 500 units, the Reference SA-KI-Pearl would be sure to become a collector’s item. It’s easy to recommend, enthusiastically and without reservation. I do.

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**ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT**

**ANALOG SOURCES**
Continuum Audio Labs Caliburn turntable, Cobra tonearm, Castellon stand; Graham Engineering Phantom II tonearm; My Sonic Labs Eminent Ex, ZYX R1000 Sigma 2 cartridges.

**DIGITAL SOURCES**

**PREAPOWERIFICATION**

**POWER AMPLIFIER**
Musical Fidelity Titan.

**LOUDSPEAKERS**
Wilson Audio Specialties Maxx 3.

**CABLES**

**ACCESSORIES**
Shunyata Research V-Ray II Reference, Silver Circle Audio Pure Power One 5.0, TARA Labs Power Screen power conditioners; Oyaide AC wall box & receptacles; Finite Elemente Pagode, HRS SKR stands; Symposium Rollerblocks; Audiodharma Cable Cooker; ASC Tube Traps, RGP BAD & Abbifusor panels; Furutech DeMag & deStat LP treatments; VPI HW-17F; Loricraft PRC4 Deluxe record-cleaning machines.

—Michael Fremer
"No cable is the be-all and end-all. But in virtually eliminating the smearing of low-level details and other anomalies that obscure resolution and cloud transparency, Platinum Eclipse represents a formidable accomplishment."

— Neil Gader, The Absolute Sound
October 2009

"I wasn’t prepared for such fabulous detail retrieval and astonishing dynamics."

— HiFi News
Editor’s Choice 2009
Aesthetix Audio Saturn Calypso Signature line preamplifier

When Aesthetix Audio's founder, Jim White, dropped off a sample of his Saturn Atlas hybrid power amplifier, which I reviewed in January 2010 (www.stereophile.com/solid_poweramps/aesthetix_atlas_power_amplifier), he also brought along a sample of his Saturn Calypso line preamplifier ($4999). Actually, two samples: One was the stock unit reviewed by Michael Fremer in July 2005 (www.stereophile.com/tubepreamps/703aesthetix), the other the Saturn Calypso Signature ($6999). At first, White said only "I think you'll find the differences instructive."

I began by listening exclusively to the stock Saturn Calypso, to establish a base line, as it were. After becoming reasonably familiar with its sound, I did the same with the Saturn Calypso Signature. Instructive indeed.

I completely agree with MF's assessment of the Saturn Calypso: It's beautifully built, smartly designed, and sonically brilliant. It was a joy to use, and an even bigger joy to listen to. Like Mikey, I'd put it up against much more expensive preamplifiers—and, 9 times out of 10, probably end up preferring it. The Calypso punched way above its weight.

The Signature version replaces the stock Saturn Calypso's polypropylene coupling capacitors with custom-made interstage Teflon-hybrid caps (four per channel), and switches out the polypropylene caps (two per channel) between the gain and output stages. White claims that this change "results in higher resolution, extension, less grain, and more air." The 2μF-output coupling capacitors (four per channel) are replaced with 4μF Dynamicaps. This change, White says, "provides more drive, bass extension, resolution, and dynamics, while also reducing grain." Highly specialized, adjustable air-core capacitors, used primarily in the radio-frequency realm, are installed and adjusted to tweak each unit to conform to a rigid standard.

The stock Calypso's five rubber feet are replaced in the Signature with Harmonic Resolutions Systems Nimbus Couplers specially made for Aesthetix. (Earlier Saturn Signature models didn't incorporate these; if you have one that lacks Nimbus Couplers, contact Aesthetix for a free upgrade.) These couplers are said to "result in a lower noise floor and more air and space." The Couplers—squishy interfaces between the preamp and whatever it sits on—are well named. When the time came to remove the Calypso Signature from my system, it took two adults to pry the preamp from the shelf. The upgrade also includes a new display window with "Signature" engraved on it.

Aesthetix measures the tubes used and opts for the best replacements it can find in its stock of graded and matched tubes. White also pointed out that, in addition to a customer buying a brand-new Saturn Calypso Signature for $6999, he'll upgrade a Calypso to Signature status for the $2000 difference in price between the two models—including tweaks to make the unit current (including software updates).

According to White, the replaced parts alone amount to "about one-quarter the cost of a new unit," by which I suspect he means one-quarter the difference in price between the stock and Signature models. By anybody's reckoning, that makes the Signature version a bit of a bargain, assuming you find the stock model's price reasonable in the first place—as I do.

Listening to Jimi Hendrix's "Castles Made of Sand," from The Ultimate Experience (CD, MCA MCAD-10829), through the stock Saturn Calypso, the song had a wide soundstage that spread Hendrix's two guitar parts to hard left and right, and pinned his voice, Noel Redding's bass, and Mitch Mitchell's drums solidly in the center—except for some phasing in the right channel on the choruses. That shift to the right was shocking. I'd heard it before, of course—many times over the years—but the Calypso made it seem fresh and real.

The Signature didn't sound immensely different, but it did have more snap and an even wider soundstage—subtle differences, perhaps, but significant in the sense that more really was more. As I said, I'd happily choose the Calypso over much of the competition, but I'd also choose the Calypso Signature over the stock model.

Listening to Zuill Bailey and Simone Dinnerstein's recording of Beethoven's Cello Sonata 3 (CD, Telarc CD-80740) through the Calypso was completely engaging. The richness of the cello and the acerbic bite of the piano were well delineated, as was the sound of the room the musicians were recorded in. The pizzicato cello notes in the Allegro ma non tanto sought out the room's boundaries, and had plenty of jump factor to boot.

Through the Signature, I could hear deeper into the room—not a huge difference, but a discernible one. Those plucked cello notes also had more bite on the attack, and seemed to be lower in pitch—or perhaps just deeper overall, a factor of both pitch and timbre. When Bailey's bow really bit into the strings, I
heard more of the bow's rosin growl.

With the lovely belted "Colours of Mercy," from the Todd Gustavson Trio's The Ground (CD, ECM 1892), the Calypso suspended Jarle Vespestad's brushwork and cymbal play on a cushion of air—it seemed to surround and float above Gustavson's piano and Harald Johnsen's double bass. That bass had heft and depth. The Calypso's sound was three-dimensional and dark—but hey, we're talking Scandinavian jazz here, so dark is appropriate. Through the Signature, the song's sense of suspension was even greater. The cymbals took longer to decay and the bass had more body. I was also more aware of the sound of the recording venue, in this case Oslo's Rainbow Studio. Again, these were small differences that added to the musicality—by which I mean that, emotionally, I was being drawn deeper into the music. Or perhaps that's just another way of saying that the Signature presented me with fewer barriers between me and the music.

The standard Saturn Calypso is a wonderful preamplifier that I think is well worth its $4995 price. The Saturn Calypso Signature is a somewhat better preamplifier for an additional $2000. Are the differences profound enough to justify the 40% increase in cost? I suppose that all depends on one's values and one's budget. I consistently preferred the Saturn Calypso Signature in comparisons, but if I hadn't had it there to A/B against the basic Calypso, I wouldn't have complained about what I was hearing at all. In fact, I did have the Signature model to compare with the Calypso, and I still had no complaints about the sound of the standard version—only admiration for how much more could be wrested from one's budget. I consistently preferred the Saturn Calypso Signature, but if I hadn't had it there to A/B against the basic Calypso, I wouldn't have complained about what I was hearing at all.

If you've got the money, Aesthetix Audio's Saturn Calypso Signature is a wonderful preamplifier that justifies its price. On the other hand, for $2000 less, the standard Saturn Calypso is still one heck of a great preamp—and it can always be upgraded to an even better one anytime you and your wallet are ready.

---Wes Phillips

**PSB Image T6 loudspeaker**

Kalman Rubinson waxed lyrical about PSB's surprisingly affordable Image T6 tower loudspeaker in the March 2010 issue of Stereophile. For $1199/pair, you get a well-finished, superb-sounding speaker. "With much more massive music, such as Christoph Eschenbach and the Philadelphia Orchestra's performance of Mahler's Symphony 6 (SACD/CD, Ondine ODE1084-5D)," Kal wrote, "the T6s offered the same deep, spacious, detailed soundstage as they had with the chamber recordings, but on a larger scale. There was such a feeling of effortlessness that I was encouraged to turn up the volume to a near natural level.” He concluded that, "for $1199/pair, [the PSB Image T6] is an absolutely wonderful full-range speaker, and is now my quasi-$1000/pair standard for an entry-level high-end loudspeaker.”

Intrigued, I asked Kal to ship me all three samples of the T6, so that I could perform on them my standard set of measurements. I used DRA Labs' MLS- SA system and a calibrated DPA 4006 microphone for the farfield responses, and an Earthworks QTC-40 for the nearfield. The PSB's sensitivity is specified as 89dB/2.83V/m; my estimate came in at 88.2dB/2.83V/m, which is close. PSB specifies the Image T6's impedance at 6 ohms, with a 4 ohm minimum magnitude. My measurement (fig.1) went a little lower than 4 ohms, with a minimum value of 3.1 ohms at 415Hz, and there is also a combination of 4.5 ohms and a -45° electrical phase angle at 94Hz. While the impedance does remain at or above 6 ohms above 1100Hz, this speaker really will work best with amplifiers or receivers rated at 4 ohms.

The small wrinkles at 26kHz in the fig.1 traces suggest that this is the frequency of the metal-dome tweeter's primary "oil-can" resonance, which is safely above the audio band. The traces are free from the small discontinuities that would indicate the presence of cabinet resonances of various kinds, but investigating the panels' vibrational behavior did uncover a relatively severe mode at 262Hz (fig.2). This was highest in level on the side panels near the speaker's base, but lower-level modes were present on the other surfaces at 234 and 277Hz. I would have expected a degree of lower-midrange congestion to be the result of this behavior, but I note that KR found nothing amiss in this region.

The sable centered on 41.5Hz in the impedance graph implies that this is the tuning frequency of each of the two

---Wes Phillips

**ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT**

**DIGITAL SOURCES**

- Ayre Acoustics C-5xe universal player; 2.5GHz Intel Apple Mac mini, with 250GB LaCie external drive & 2TB Infrant Technologies NAS; Bel Canto e.One DAC3/VBS, Ayre Acoustics QB-9 D/A processors; Bel Canto USB Link 24/96 USB-S/PDIF converter.

**PREAMPLIFIER**

- Aesthetix Audio Saturn Calypso.

**POWER AMPLIFIERS**

- Aesthetix Audio Saturn Atlas; Parasound Halo JC 1 monoblocks.

**LOUDSPEAKERS**


**CABLES**


**ACCESSORIES**

- Aesthetix Audio Myrtle Blocks, DH Labs ceramic cones, Furutech RDP panels, Shunyata Research V-Ray AC filter.

---Wes Phillips

---Wes Phillips

---Wes Phillips
ports on the front baffle. The ports had identical outputs, and the woofers were also very closely matched in response. The red trace in fig.3 shows the sum of the two port outputs, which does peak between 30 and 80Hz, with well-controlled rollouts above and below that region. The summed response of the woofers (fig.3, blue trace) has its minimum-motion notch at the port tuning frequency, and their output crosses over to the midrange output (fig.3, green trace) at 550Hz. The crossover appears to be 18dB/octave for the midrange high-pass, and 24dB/octave for the woofers low-pass. The farfield measurements taken to produce this graph were made on the midrange axis, which is 37" from the floor. The output of the midrange and tweeter are extremely flat on this axis, and the inevitable dip below the tweeter resonance doesn’t occur until above 19kHz.

Fig.4 shows how these individual drive-unit outputs sum in the farfield, again on the midrange axis. The Image T6’s overall response is commendably flat, though there is a slight lack of midrange energy compared with the regions above and below and a slight peak in the mid-treble. Most of the apparent boost in the upper bass will be an artifact of the nearfield measurement technique, but the speaker is balanced a little on the rich side. As I had all three samples available for measurement, I examined each of them. The red trace in fig.5 is the midrange-axis response of the same sample as in fig.4 (S/N 901423); the blue and green traces show the responses of the other two samples (S/N 901427 and 901319, respectively).

While the tweeter’s ultrasonic resonance is a little different in each speaker, overall this is superb matching for what is a reasonably priced model.

The Image T6’s lateral dispersion on the MF axis is shown in fig.6. The radiation pattern is smooth, even, and well controlled, with just a hint of off-axis flare at the bottom of the tweeter’s passband. In the vertical plane (fig.7), there are only mild changes in response as the listener moves above or below the midrange axis.

In the time domain, the PSB Image T6’s step response on the midrange axis (fig.8) indicates that the tweeter and midrange unit are connected in inverted acoustic polarity, the woofers
in positive polarity. Reflecting the superb integration of their outputs seen in the frequency domain, the decay of each drive-unit's step is smoothly integrated with the rise of the step of the next lower in frequency. This is textbook design. The PSB's cumulative spectral-decay plot (fig.9) is superbly clean, especially in the tweeter's passband, which is especially commendable at this price level.

I am not surprised that Kal Rubinson liked the PSB Image T6 as much as he did. Its measured performance is almost without peer in this price region. This is a speaker you must hear.

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**Boulder Amplifiers 1008 phono preamplifier**

With Michael Fremer reviewing three very expensive phono preamplifiers in this month's "Analog Corner," I thought I should investigate their measured performance. I feel that at these rarefied price levels, the user is entitled to not only superb sound but superb engineering as well. The first product to cross my test bench was the Boulder 1008 ($12,000, serial no. J016). Measurements of the Abbingdon Music Research PH-77 Reference Class Phono Equaliser ($11,995) and Vitus Audio MP-P201 Masterpiece Series Phono Preamplifier ($60,000) will follow in a future issue.

I measured the Boulder 1008 with Stereophile's loan sample of the Audio Precision SYS2722 system (see the January 2008 "As We See It" and www.ap.com). The voltage gain was sensibly arranged, at 38.4dB for moving-magnet cartridges and 64dB for moving-coils. These figures include the interaction between the signal generator's source impedance and the Boulder's input impedance. Adjusted for that effect, the gains are 42.5dB and 68.5dB, respectively. Both inputs preserved absolute polarity (ie, were non-inverting), and, with the supplied loading resistor in place in each input module, offered low input impedances of 74 ohms (MC) and 80 ohms (MM). Though both figures were consistent across the audioband, the latter, of course, is much lower than is required for proper operation; Boulder supplies modules dedicated for MM use, which offer the proper 47k loading.

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The output impedance was a low 100 ohms, this again consistent across the audioband. The unweighted, audioband signal/noise ratio was superb in both modes, at 76.5dB (MM, ref. 1kHz input at 5mV) and 60dB (MC, ref. 1kHz at 500µV), these figures improving, when A-weighted, to 82.9 and 64.75dB, respectively. Channel separation (fig.1) was also superb, at >100dB in both directions below 500Hz, and still 74dB (R—L, blue trace) and 88dB (L—R, red) at 20kHz.

The Boulder 1008's RIAA error is shown by the dark-gray traces in fig.2; the departure from perfect equalization is vanishingly low in both channels, with just a slight (0.1dB) boost evident in the very low bass. With the low-cut filter engaged (fig.2, bottom gray traces below 100Hz), the bass output is curtailed by just 2.5dB at 10Hz. The other traces in fig.2 show the 1008's responses with the alternative EQ curves offered: the blue and red traces show the RIAA curve (the right channel, red trace, has less output than the left above the audioband); the cyan and magenta traces show the Columbia curve; and the green and black traces shows the hfr curve. You can see why, with historic recordings, it will be important to use the correct EQ.

The Boulder produced very low distortion at normal signal levels: around 0.0037% THD+noise (MM) and 0.065% (MC), both figures uniform across the audioband. Into high impedances at a typical output level, what distortion there is is entirely third-harmonic in nature, and, at ~120dB, will be of no subjective consequence. Reducing the loading to the demanding 600 ohms introduces a vanishingly small amount of fifth harmonic (fig.3). The downward slope with frequency of the traces in this graph, incidentally, shows the effect of the RIAA equalization. The right channel does have some low-level supply-related spurious visible; I couldn't eliminate these by experimenting with the grounding between the Boulder and the Audio Precision, but as even the highest in level is just above ~100dB (0.001%), this won't be audible.

The Boulder 1008's overload margins were among the highest I have encountered. The MM mode didn't reach 1% THD+N until 33dB above a nominal 1kHz level of 5mV at all audio frequencies, while the MC mode was a still superb 27dB ref. 500µV at 1kHz at all frequencies, despite the 30dB greater gain. The voltage at the Boulder's output was 18.2V when the phono input reached its overload limit! Under all normal conditions, the Boulder 1008 will offer its owner superb linearity.

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The Boulder 1008 may be expensive, but it offers superb measured performance, as well as a standard of construction that is to die for.

—John Atkinson

The Boulder 1008 may be expensive, but it offers superb measured performance, as well as a standard of construction that is to die for.

—John Atkinson

**ProAc Response D Two loudspeaker**

John Marks wrote about ProAc's Response D Two ($3500/pair) in the June 2010 installment of his column, "The Fifth Element." (p.51) This stand-mounted loudspeaker combines a 1" silk-dome tweeter with a 6.5" glass-fiber cone woofer in a ported enclosure, and resembles a classic British two-way monitor. When he drove the ProAc with the tubed Leben CS600 integrated amplifier, JM didn't find the speaker to have the classic "nearfield monitor" sound, with an exaggerated upper bass. While the Response D Two did offer "great clarity," he wrote, "there was a satisfying sense of heft, but only when that heft was actually in the music." The Leben-ProAc pairing had a "finely balanced combination of transparency and clarity that coexisted with musical weight and warmth," JM concluded. "Not an easy trick to pull off."

ProAc specifies the D Two's voltage sensitivity as 88.5dB/W/m; my estimate was significantly lower, at 85dB (B)/2.83V/m. However, while the speaker's nominal impedance is 8 ohms, the impedance of my sample (S/N 000628) drops below 8 ohms only in the lower midrange, and remains above 10 ohms throughout the upper midrange to the mid-treble (fig.1). The electrical phase angle is also relatively small over much of the audioband, meaning that, in combination with the generally high impedance magnitude, this ProAc will therefore be a relatively easy load for an amplifier to drive. The somewhat low-powered Leben integrated amp was a good match for it.

There is a slight discontinuity in the impedance traces at 300Hz; when I investigated the enclosure panels' vibrational behavior with an accelerometer, I did indeed find a fairly strong resonant mode at 300Hz, as well as another, lower-level mode at 400Hz, both of them present on all surfaces (fig.2). I would have expected these modes to add a slight degree of midrange congestion at high playback levels, though JM wasn't bothered by any coloration problems that could have been laid at the feet of these modes.

5 ProAc Loudspeakers, Highpoint House, Riding Road, Buckingham Road Industrial Estate, Brackley, Northamptonshire NN13 7BE, England, UK. Tel: (44) (0)1280-700147. Fax: (44) (0)1280-700148. Web: www.proac-loudspeakers.com. US distributor: Modern Audio, PO Box 334, Stevenson, MD 21153. Tel: (410) 486-5975. E-mail: modaudio@aol.com.

The saddle between 40 and 50Hz between the two impedance peaks suggests that this is where the port tuning frequency lies. The woofer's nearfield response does indeed have its minimum-motion notch at 42Hz (fig.3, blue trace), which is the frequency of the lowest note of the four-string bass guitar and double bass. The peak in the port's output (fig.3, red trace) is a little broader than usual, but rolls off above 80Hz. Higher in frequency, the woofer crosses over to the tweeter (fig.3, green trace) just above 2kHz, with a slight peak apparent in its output at 1200Hz. Though another woofer peak is visible at 4.5kHz, this is suppressed by the crossover filter. The tweeter's output is generally even within its passband, but this driver does appear to be balanced about 3dB too high in level for an optimal match to the woofer.

Fig.4 shows how the individual drive-unit responses combine on

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**Fig.1 ProAc Response D Two, electrical impedance (solid) and phase (dashed). (2 ohms/vertical div.)**

**Fig.2 ProAc Response D Two, cumulative spectral-decay plot calculated from output of accelerometer fastened to center of side panel (MLS driving voltage to speaker, 7.55V; measurement bandwidth, 2kHz).**

**Fig.3 ProAc Response D Two, acoustic crossover on tweeter axis at 50°, corrected for microphone response, with nearfield responses of woofer (blue) and port (red), plotted below 350Hz and 300Hz, respectively.**

**Fig.4 ProAc Response D Two, anechoic response on tweeter axis at 50°, averaged across 30° horizontal window and corrected for microphone response, with complex sum of nearfield responses plotted below 300Hz.**
Something Missing from Your System?

You have good components, but how good is your sound?
Cables can be the final piece of the puzzle that allows your system to open up and sing. Remember that your amp + speaker + speaker cable is a circuit. Better cable choices will allow the components to function better — closer to their design ideals, and give you better sound.

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the tweeter axis in the farfield, averaged across a 30° horizontal window. The midrange is impressively smooth, though a slight rising trend is apparent in the treble. The apparent boost in the upper bass will be partly due to the tweeter axis in the farfield, averaged across a 30° horizontal window. The apparent boost in the upper bass will be partly due to the tweeter being a little hot balances this, so that the listener's ear latches on to the extremes at the treble and bass ends of the spectrum as being correct, and therefore perceives the broad trough in between as making the speaker sound a little laid-back. This is the classic "smile" balance that has been so popular over the years. (It's called "smile" because that's how it appears on a graph.) However, JM did comment on the ProAc's excellent presentation of detail when driven by the Leben amplifier—"I suspect that the Ohm's Law interaction between the tube amp's relatively high source impedance and the manner in which the speakers' impedance rises between the upper midrange and the mid-treble tend to cancel the "smile," at least to some extent.

JM auditioned the ProAc's without their grilles. This was just as well, as the grilles reduced the mid-treble energy by up to 2dB (not shown), which will indeed emphasize the speaker's laid-back character.

The Response D Two's horizontal dispersion will also have an effect on the perceived balance in all but very large rooms. Fig.5 reveals that the woofer gets a little more directional at the top of its passband, giving rise to a slight flare off axis at the bottom of the tweeter's passband. This will also work against the "smile" character. As usual with a design using a 1" tweeter, the D Two's radiation pattern narrows in the top two octaves, which will tend to balance the tweeter's hot on-axis output in the same region. Vertically (fig.6), a deep suckout develops in the ProAc's output for listening axes above the top of the cabinet. The stands used should be tall enough to place the listener's ears on or just below the tweeter axis, to produce the optimal balance.

Finally, there are no surprises in the D Two's step response (fig.7), which reveals that both drive-units are connected in positive acoustic polarity, with the tweeter's output leading that of the woofer but smoothly integrated with it. A small reflection can be seen about 1 millisecond after the woofer's output, which correlated with a small mode at 1235Hz in the cumulative spectral-decay plot (fig.8). However, other than the decay of this mode, the D Two's sound is superbly clean.

I am not surprised that John Marks was impressed by the sound of the ProAc Response D Two—this is a well-engineered loudspeaker from a designer with a long track record of producing good-sounding speakers.

—John Atkinson

Bel Canto e.One REF1000 Mk.2 monoblock power amplifier

Since he wrote about them in his March 2009 "Music in the Round" column (www.stereophile.com/musicintheround/musici_the_ round_35), Kalman Rubinson has been using as his reference power amplifiers Bel Canto's e.One REF1000 Mk.2 class-D monoblocks ($3990/pair). Like the original REF1000, which KR wrote about in November 2006 (see www.stereophile.com/musicintheround/1106mitr), the Mk.2 uses Bang & Olufsen's 1000ASP ICEpower modules, but with improvements in mechanical damping, parts selection, and filtering of the residual switching noise present at the amplifier's output. With the Bel Cantos driving his B&W 802D speakers, Kal found the amplifiers sounded "even livelier and more transparent than their predecessors, with no vestige of HF grain to mar the awesome illusion... Compared with nonswitching amps such as Classe's Omicron or CA-3200, the Bel Canto e.Ones could seem somewhat 'literal' in terms of their tightly defined two-channel soundstage," he wrote, "but that disappeared in multichannel use. In fact, even in stereo, I could make a case for the Bel Cantos being more truthful than the Classés, if less luxurious."

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cally promising products that have been reviewed by the magazine’s regular columnists, I subjected the REF1000 Mk.2 to my usual battery of tests. I mainly used Stereophile’s loan sample of the top-of-the-line Audio Precision SYS2722 system (see the January 2008 “As We See It” and www.ap.com); for some tests, I also used my vintage Audio Precision System One Dual Domain. To minimize the effect of the HF switching noise on the measurements, I used an Audio Precision passive low-pass filter ahead of each analyzer. As usual, I preconditioned the amplifier (serial no. RI-149) by running it at one-third power into 8 ohms for an hour before performing any measurements. Like any other amplifier that uses a switching output stage, which is very efficient at converting electrical power from the wall into loudspeaker-driving current, the Bel Canto did not get hot under these conditions.

The input impedance was to specification at low and middle frequencies, at 200k ohms balanced and 100k ohms unbalanced. These figures dropped to 160k and 58k ohms at 20kHz, respectively, but these are still usefully high input impedances. Both inputs preserved absolute polarity; i.e., were non-inverting. The amplifier’s output impedance was <0.1 ohm in the audioband, rising to 0.35 ohm at 20kHz, due to the effect of its series low-pass filter ahead of the output terminals. The effect of this filter can be seen in fig.1, which shows the amplifier’s small-signal frequency response: the output into 8 ohms rolls off rapidly above 20kHz (blue trace) and with our standard simulated loudspeaker (black), and above 10kHz into 4 ohms (magenta) and 2 ohms (red). There is some peaking evident into 2 ohms (the lowest impedance the amplifier is rated into), but even with 8 ohms, squarewaves show a well-damped overshoot (fig.2). (This graph was taken with the AP filter; without the filter, ultrasonic noise with a center frequency of 110kHz and an amplitude of 1.14V obscured the waveform tops and bottoms.)

Bel Canto rates the REF1000’s maximum power at >500W into 8 ohms and >1000W into 4 ohms. I measured maximum powers of 600W into 8 ohms (27.8dBW) and 1200W into 4 ohms (27.8dBW). With continuous drive, the amplifier turned itself off at 1kW into 2 ohms (24dBW), which was well below clipping. Despite its minuscule size and weight, this is a very powerful amplifier. Distortion was very low in the midband and bass, particularly into high impedances, but rose in the treble (fig.3). Though the rise in THD+noise was not to an alarmingly high level into 8 ohms, this graph confirms that the REF1000 will be more comfortable with higher-impedance speakers, where the residual distortion at relatively low powers was primarily lower-order harmonics (fig.4). Higher-order harmonics appeared into low impedances and at higher powers (fig.5), due to discontinuities at the signal’s zero-crossing points. These harmonics all lie at relatively low levels, however.

Testing for intermodulation products with an equal mix of 19 and 20kHz tones proved problematic, because there appeared to be a “history effect” at levels much above 20V. At first, the REF1000 Mk.2 reproduced the signal without any problem, but after a short while, the waveform squared and remained clipped until the drive signal was reduced. Fig.6 shows the spectrum of the Bel Canto’s output at the highest continuous level it would deliver into 4 ohms with this demanding signal. While the difference product at 1kHz is very low, the higher-order components at 18 and 21kHz lie just below –60dB (0.1%).

This latest version of Bel Canto’s REF1000 Mk.2 monoblock offers very high power from its diminutive chassis. It does work best with higher-impedance loudspeakers, however, and at lower frequencies. Fortunately, music rarely includes enough high top-octave energy to reveal the amplifier’s unhappiness in this region.

—John Atkinson
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“K ill the album. Kill the sucker.”

Guess who?

Could those words have come from anyone but America’s greatest ring-a-ding-ding wannabe gangster, Francis Albert Sinatra? In Sinatra lore, that was what he said to pull the plug on the second of two records he made with bossa-nova boy wonder Antonio Carlos Jobim.

Sinatra’s two sets of recording sessions with Jobim were done at Western Recorders, at 6050 Sunset Boulevard in Los Angeles: January 30–February 1, 1967, and February 11–13, 1969. The title of the first album to come from them, Francis Albert Sinatra and Antonio Carlos Jobim—notice whose name is first—included a classic twist: If the kid from Brazil could use three names, then so would Frank, whose name had a poetic roll.

Released in 1967, this first Jobim-Sinatra record climbed to No. 19 on the charts, but did not initially outsell his three previous records (Strangers in the Night, That’s Life, Francis A. Sinatra and Edward K. Ellington). There’s always been the suggestion that Sinatra’s bossa-nova albums made him a Johnny-come-lately to the trend. After all, Jazz Samba, the record by Stan Getz and Charlie Byrd that lit the bossa-nova fire in America, was released in April 1962. But, to be fair, Sinatra had flirted with Latin rhythms as early as 1965, on Moonlight Sinatra.

Late or not, both records sound like nothing else in the Sinatra catalog. From the opening bars of the “Girl from Ipanema,” in which Jobim sings the second verse, then namely duets with Sinatra’s major-league instrument, it’s clear, at least on P.A.S. and A.C.J., that Frank had never before sung so softly. In “If You Never Come to Me,” his voice is so light that it often nearly cracks from lack of breath. This lightness forces Sinatra to dig deep for the fine, wave-like textures that appear here in his voice, as well as an emotional fragility and subtlety that he really never found again. Three tunes on the record are not Jobim compositions, yet even in these—as “Change Partners,” by that noted bossa-novist Irving Berlin, here given a Latin flair by Claus Ogerman, who arranged everything for the first album—Sinatra sounds out of his element, reaching for something inside he’s never quite tapped into before.

And on the sexy Sinatra scale, his vocal performance on “Quiet Nights of Quiet Stars (Corcovado),” paired with Ogerman’s lush orchestral arrangement, is easily one of the most seductive bedroom ballads ever recorded by this master of the form.

Sinatra’s second encounter with Jobim, two years later, intended for an album called Sinatra-Jobim, was vastly different from the 1967 sessions. Where the first record was uncommonly and unexpectedly quiet, the new sessions were upbeat, and featured a far more prominent rhythm section and more muscular arrangements by a long-haired Brazilian, 26-year-old Eumir Deodato. In a tune like “Drinking Water (Agua de Beber),” with Jobim chanting rhythmically in the background and winds, particularly flutes, punching in and out, Sinatra turns the samba flavors into swing. As on the first record, Sinatra often sounds out of his Tin Pan Alley comfort zone, which makes him work harder than usual. In “One Note Samba (Samba de Uma Nota So),” he ends up singing below his normal range, and nearly has to talk his way through the lines. Remastered in 24-bit transfers especially for this release, the sound of both sessions is lush and natural, though not all that different from the original digital remasterings, the most obvious change for the better being added depth in the midrange.

Sinatra-Jobim is the album that Sinatra allegedly killed with that legendary phone call to Reprise. Famous as a “lost” album, it’s also notable among the Sinatra faithful for its surreal aborted cover art, happily reproduced in the CD booklet of this reissue, featuring Sinatra standing behind a Greyhound bus, in a jungle.

Sinatra-Jobim was scheduled for release in 1969 on LP and 8-track tape, but only a few of the 8-tracks made it into stores to be sold to customers. According to the liner notes for this package by former Executive VP of Warner Bros. Records Stan Cornyn, one of those hallowed tape cartridges recently sold on eBay for $4550. Seven of the ten tunes originally recorded for the spiked record later appeared on Sinatra & Company (1971), a slapdash compilation whose flip side was filled with various soft-rock singles, produced by Don Costa. The three remaining tracks from the original ten were the problem cuts that supposedly motivated Sinatra to kill the album. “Son of the Samba” and “Bossa” were finally released on a 1979 Brazil-only release, The Sinatra-Jobim Sessions. “Off Key (Desafiado),” with an amateurish vocal but great guitarwork by Jobim, remained unavailable until the release in 1995 of The Complete Reprise Studio Recordings: Deluxe Edition.

According to Sinatra scholar Tony Sachs, another school of thought about the demise of Sinatra-Jobim holds that by 1969 the bossa-nova craze had long passed, and that Warner Bros., not Sinatra, pulled the plug on the record before it reached stores—except, of course, for those few tantalizing 8-tracks. Whatever the case—and the image of Frank growling at Mo Ostin is a lot more fun—the collaborations of Francis Albert Sinatra and Antonio Carlos Jobim, compiled in their entirety here for the first time, are a rich, striking left turn in Sinatra’s massive catalog of irreplaceable recordings.

—Robert Baird
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CHOPIN


Cello Sonata, Piano Trio, Grand Duo

Sonics ****
Performance ****

piano writing, and spontaneous, noble expressiveness.

The Piano Trio, Op.8, composed in 1828–29, is dedicated to Prince Antoni Radziwill, a Polish arts patron and amateur cellist. The Cello Sonata, Op.65 (1845–46), was written for Chopin's friend, the French cellist Auguste Franchomme, who had previously advised him on the cello part of the Grand Duo concertante for cello and piano. Based on themes from Meyerbeer's opera Robert le Diable, which was the rage in Paris, it was commissioned by the publisher Schlesinger only three months after Chopin arrived there in 1831. Although the piano, not surprisingly, has the most prominent part, the cello's role in these works was clearly important to Chopin. Thus, it seems natural that this recording centers around the piano, not surprisingly, has the most prominent part, the cello's role in these works was clearly important to Chopin. Thus, it seems natural that this recording centers around the piano, not surprisingly, has the most prominent part, the cello's role in these works was clearly important to Chopin. Thus, it seems natural that this recording centers around the piano, not surprisingly, has the most prominent part, the cello's role in these works was clearly important to Chopin. Thus, it seems natural that this recording centers around the piano, not surprisingly, has the most prominent part, the cello's role in these works was clearly important to Chopin. Thus, it seems natural that this recording centers around the piano, not surprisingly, has the most prominent part, the cello's role in these works was clearly important to Chopin. Thus, it seems natural that this recording centers around the piano, not surprisingly, has the most prominent part, the cello's role in these works was clearly important to Chopin. Thus, it seems natural that this recording centers around the piano, not surprisingly, has the most prominent part, the cello's role in these works was clearly important to Chopin. Thus, it seems natural that this recording centers around the piano, not surprisingly, has the most prominent part, the cello's role in these works was clearly important to Chopin. Thus, it seems natural that this recording centers around the piano, not surprisingly, has the most prominent part, the cello's role in these works was clearly important to Chopin. Thus, it seems natural that this recording centers around the piano, not surprisingly, has the most prominent part, the cello's role in these works was clearly important to Chopin. Thus, it seems natural that this recording centers around the piano, not surprisingly, has the most prominent part, the cello's role in these works was clearly important to Chopin.

MOZART & SPOHR

Clarinet Concertos

MOZART: Clarinet Concerto in A, K.622

SPOHR: Clarinet Concerto 2 in E-flat, Op.57

Jon Manasse, clarinet; Gerard Schwarz, Seattle Symphony


MOZART: Sublime Mozart: Works for Clarinet

Clarinet Concerto in A, K.622; Clarinet Quintet in A, K.581

Paul Dean, clarinet; Guillaume Tourniaire, Queensland Orchestra; The Grainger Quartet

World Radio History

www.Stereophile.com, July 2010
new Orleans is known for its drummers, and one of the most gifted young players on the scene is Stanton Moore. Moore is on three recently released albums that showcase his varied skills.

Galactic, Moore’s main gig, has just released Ya-Ka-May, an album that signals a new direction for the group. When bassist Robert Mercurio and guitarist Jeff Raines moved to New Orleans from Washington, DC, in the 1990s, they wanted to take the longwinded Go Go beat from their hometown and refashion it with an infusion of Big Easy funk. Moore joined them, bringing along a second-line-influenced groove that gave Galactic its rhythmic identity, while vocalist Theryl “Houseman” DeClouet added much-needed R&B credibility to the mix.

With this lineup Galactic became a major carrier of hybrid New Orleans funk, as evidenced in the albums Crazyhorse Monkey and Ruckus, as well as a popular group on the jam-band circuit. But when DeClouet had to retire from performing for health reasons, the band was faced with an identity crisis. It’s extremely difficult for a well-branded touring band to replace its frontman, but Galactic came up with the brilliant solution of featuring itself as a rhythm section backing various artists.

From the Corner to the Block (2006) employed several hip-hop MCs in a concept album. Moore created a library of drum beats that were used as loops to build the tracks on, an approach more in line with hip-hop production methods. This new template for Galactic mixed its funk with the New Orleans brand of hip-hop known as bounce, a simple, celebratory rhythm based on the parade music of the city’s second-line culture.

Ya-Ka-May completes this transition, as Galactic fashions beats for a variety of New Orleans vocalists and instrumentalists. The strength of this approach is its consistency—whether it’s Allen Toussaint or a bounce rapper in the lead, the album is all Galactic from start to finish. The sound here is cluttered and occasionally rough-edged on purpose, so it may prove challenging for some.

The set opens with New Orleans’ venerable horror-movie host, Morgus the Magnificent, describing one of his harebrained experiments in “Friends of Science”; it hits the street with the Rebirth Brass Band for “Boe Money”, then heads for the dance floor with transgendered “sissy bounce” star Big Freedia declaiming “Double It.” Next comes the first of several shockers, when soul icon Irma Thomas gets a dramatic musical makeover in “Heart of Steel.” Thomas sounds so good, her big voice matching the overdriven power of Mercurio’s bass, that she should probably make a whole record with this kind of support. Similarly, Allen Toussaint sounds fresh on “Bacchus,” which turns on a simple piano phrase and a distorted vocal reminiscent of the sound Toussaint went for on his own Southern Nights. Galactic goes on to treat Big Chief Bo Dollis as a sample (“Wild Man”); provide great settings for vocalists John Boutte (“Dark Water”) and Glen David Andrews (“You Don’t Know”) and throw down with horn players Trombone Shorty and Corey Henry (“Cinerea”).

Guitarist Anders Osborne delivers a blistering solo on “Dark Water,” and Moore returns the favor on Osborne’s outstanding new release, American Patchwork. Moore and Osborne coproduced this outing, which gives Osborne a hard-rock trio setting, with Moore and keyboardist Robert Walter. Pepper Keenan, of Down and Corrosion of Conformity, guests on guitar and percussion, and coproduced. Moore’s tough, direct rock drumming provides a great rhythmic platform for Osborne’s virtuoso electric guitar work on several intense tracks: “On the Road to Charlie Parker,” “The Echoes of My Sins,” “Killing Each Other,” and “Darkness at the Bottom.”
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Moore shows another side of his talents on his new solo album, *Groove Alchemy*, part of a multimedia project that also includes a DVD and an instructional book tracing the history of blues, R&B, funk, and rock through the influence of drummers whose vision changed the ways the beat was perceived. Although the goal of the project is to instruct, the record is also a delightful listen even if you're not looking for the lesson. "Pot Licker," for example, demonstrates how the styles of drummers Clyde Stubblefield and Jabo Starks intermesh, while "Neeps and Tatties" shows how Joseph "Ziggy" Modeliste, of the Meters, influenced Led Zeppelin drummer John Bonham. Keyboardist Robert Walter, who also plays on *American Patchwork*, is part of Moore's trio here, along with guitarist Will Bernard. Walter, who has lived in New Orleans since the turn of the century, sounds particularly great on this set, and is a reminder of what may be Moore's greatest skill: making everyone he plays with sound as good as they possibly can.

— John Swenson

**THE TALLEST MAN ON EARTH**

*The Wild Hunt*


Performance ****  
Sonics ******

The Wild Hunt, the second full-length album from Swedish singer-songwriter Kristian Matsson, performing as The Tallest Man On Earth, is a plainly arranged and passionate piece of work deeply steeped in the rural American folk-rock tradition. A constant, fluid motion of long, scintillating guitar lines is plucked, strummed, arpeggiated, and banged out, complemented only by the occasional footfall or chime, while Matsson lets loose, in his peculiarly high-pitched, guttural cry, the most provocative and vivid poetry.

There's a necessary sparseness here. More complex arrangements simply wouldn't hold: Matsson, hacking with such urgency and arresting conviction, is, clearly enough, all on his own. We get to know him well when he proclaims, "I bend my arrows now in circles, and I shoot around the hill / If I don't get you in the morning, by the evening I sure will / Because I'm the fire on the mountain you have lit up in your dream / But also water in the fountain you could send myself on me." It's this combination of strength and vulnerability that makes Matsson's characters, like his music, so undeniably captivating.

While *The Wild Hunt* is mastered too loud, audiophiles will still be pleased by the album's wealth of light, shade, and detail. The blistering acoustic guitar work makes this album demo material. Even more pleasing is the great sense of space: We hear Matsson as if he were standing on a mountaintop—as if he were, indeed, the tallest man on earth.

—Stephen Mejias

**TUNNG**

*And Then We Saw Land*


Performance ****  
Sonics ******

It's often around a band's fourth album that the collective will decide it's time to change or die. It's also when a band's founder—in this case, Tunng's Sam Genders—decides he's said all he can in that context, or needs fresh inspiration (or is sick of his handmates, dammit!), and splits. The old equation of addition by subtraction kicks in, and voilà!—along comes an album like *And Then We Saw Land*. After three records of experimental folktronica, a blend of electronics and the Steeleye Span/Fairport Convention vein of English folk music, Tunng has decided to focus this album on the vocal pairing of Becky Jacobs and Mike Lindsay and a more ac-
accessible sound. The first single, “Hustle,” which retains a taste of electronica in its opening programmed blurble, is a very likable melody supported by banjos, acoustic guitars, and sweet vocal harmonies. The electric guitar in the ELO-ish, loud/soft, chorus-of-voices “Don’t Look Down or Back” seems like just the right touch; “These Winds” is a heartfelt bow to the a cappella side of the English folk tradition; and even the instrumental works—“By Dusk They Were In the City” mixes a bouncy rhythm with a cheesy Casio keyboard sound. It’s true that “Santiago” does get too sing-songy for its own good, but overall, this veering away from the more experimental work on Tunig’s last album, Good Arrows (2007), has better-written songs and a more coherent vision. Art must change.

—Robert Baird

MIKE FAHIE
Anima

Mike Fahie, trombone; Bill McHenry, tenor saxophone; Ben Monder, guitar;
Ben Street, bass; Billy Hart, drums
Performance ****
Sonic ****½

Recently this writer, in a conversation with another journalist, described a jazz musician as “obscure.” He responded, “By now, they’re all obscure.” Perhaps so. We live in a world where Pat Metheny, Brad Mehldau, and Joshua Redman get demoted by their major record label (Warner Bros.) to a subsidiary niche label (Nonesuch).

Enter Mike Fahie. Ever heard of him? Me neither. He is an erudite, witty composer and a trombonist with serious chops. That albums like Anima keep getting made proves that jazz as an art form is thriving, even if jazz as a business is on its ass.

Anima features no one in particular, as Art Blakey used to say. Everyone here is a creative soloist, but the album is mostly about Fahie’s intricate compositions and ensemble concepts, which sound breezy when played by the quick, agile organism of this quintet. “June with John” starts with an eight-note measure, subtracts one note per bar until none are left, then starts adding them in again. “Waltz for P.C.” is in three keys a major third apart.

Both come across as approachable, even simple. Bassist Ben Street and Billy Hart (the greatest obscure drummer in jazz) remain true to their assertive, volatile personalities while keeping Anima light and airy.

Paul Simon’s “Cecilia” is a brilliant choice. Streetwitches. Hart rumbles and tumbles. After Fahie’s epic, declamatory, diverse trombone solo, Bill McHenry stabs and shoots defiant tenor saxophone runs and Ben Monder scatters a lovely independent array of guitar notes. It is funny when they all return to the dervish of the famously, additively singable “Cecilia,” and take it out deadpan and dry.

Not only is the jazz art form in good hands, so is jazz engineering. Jim Clouse, like Mike Fahie, is not famous. His Park West Studio is a small basement in Brooklyn. With modest older equipment (a Mackie console, Digital Performer software, affordable microphones) he achieves stunning results on Anima. Street’s bass is powerful and physical yet not overbearing. Hart’s drum kit is arrayed across both channels, the cymbals going way beyond the outer edges of your speakers. The horns and guitar are alive in free air.

—Thomas Conrad

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Fi 2b preamplifier
Editor:
Many thanks, Art, for a fine and wonderfully nuanced review of the 2b. It's an all-new one, not a revision. (There is a revision of the original, the ultimate revision, called the Evolution.) And the production models now shipping have complete labeling. I found a silk-screen shop in New Hampshire; hope they're still around for the next project.

There are different approaches to sound. Some of the folks who were around at 30 Watts St. talked about doing an amplifier strictly for blues, called the Night Train. From which I got an idea for a line stage to be called the Ripple—it would have built-in adjustable tremolo and reverb. Never did that one, at least not yet, though it could be fun. And yes, I realize this is a crude parody and that other approaches are as legitimate as mine, and that some of them are done by people who have a much greater knowledge of electronics than I do. I might, on occasion, even admit to envy. But given the choice between "heavier, more timbrally saturated sound" and a more open sort of clarity," I'm with the latter, as you noted. And if it can conjure up a beautiful woman in an old race car... I'm delighted to read you need both! Gear Fab!

Don Garber

Cambridge Audio Azur 650BD
Editor:
Our thanks to Stereophile, and specifically to Kalman Rubinson, for his detailed review of the Cambridge Audio Azur 650BD. His comment "a player that one can enjoy with any good system, even one based on speakers and electronics costing many times as much" handily sums up the entire Cambridge Audio lineup. I always refer to the range as budget audiophile offerings, due to its inherent great value coupled with sound quality that belies its modest price.

In reference to the SACD intertrack tick that Kalman experienced... his review sample was from the first production run, and subsequent units have been updated with the latest firmware, which eliminates the issue. Our customer-support team will be happy to update any units that experience a similar problem.

And a further thank you, Kalman, for the sidebar explanation about Cambridge Audio's relationship with Mediatek. One of the realities of a global marketplace is that the goods we buy often benefit from the collaborative efforts of specialized component manufacturers. The UK-based Cambridge Audio design team utilizes the best and most reliable technology that they can source, and Mediatek has been one of their key partners for years. In the end, we believe that the performance and the obvious value of the Azur 650BD will speak for themselves.

Ian McArthur
Audio Plus Services

Aesthetix Calypso Signature
Editor:
Thanks to Wes Phillips and Stereophile for revisiting our Saturn Calypso and auditioning the newer Calypso Signature line stage. Wes enjoyed listening to both, and aptly described the parts changes and sonic qualities of the standard and Signature models.

It is important to note that upgrading from high-quality parts to more specialized parts is not just "tweaking," but the evolution of a sophisticated design. We have found that simply installing the latest "audiophile" fad parts often results in poorer performance; true improvements require painstaking research and balance.

The Calypso was introduced in 2002, and its design was derived from our reference Jupiter Callisto line stage. The Callisto, introduced in 1995, uses a total of 16 tubes (8 for audio, 8 in the power supply) in two large chassis with dual-mono boards, one for each channel. Fifteen years later, it is still being manufactured and is available in Mk.II, Signature, and Eclipse versions.

The Calypso also uses dual-mono boards, one for each channel, but in a single chassis, with a power supply similar to the Calisto's, albeit with solid-state tube regulation. The Calypso uses a total of only four tubes (two per channel) in its pure-tube audio signal path. The Calypso's combination of "modern" design, build quality, and sound (ie. low coloration, wide bandwidth, and wide dynamics) makes it a popular choice with first-time owners of tube preamps as well as seasoned tube-aholics. As Wes found, the Calypso is equally comfortable driving a solid-state power amp (a popular choice, as evidenced by our warranty cards), our own hybrid Atlas power amp (which began shipping in late 2007), or an all-tube design.

The Calypso and all Aesthetix products provide a foundation that can both support and benefit from a lavish array of specialized components. It is not a matter of making it sound different, but of making it perform at a higher level of resolution and musical honesty. When we develop a Signature or Eclipse version of one of our proven designs, we personally audition many parts configurations, both in-house and in various other systems. We strive to further improve what Wes and others note as outstanding performance and value. These qualities are direct results of our designs and efficient manufacturing, such as sharing chassis and power-supply construction among all of our Saturn line-end components: Calypso, Rhea phono, and Janus full-function preamp.

Wes paraphrases my comments regarding the sonic benefits of the parts used in the Signature version. I'd like to offer a more technical description. The Signature's Teflon-hybrid film/foil interstage coupling capacitors have significantly less dielectric absorption (memory effect) than the standard's polypropylene capacitors. The result is a lower noise floor, for improved low-level resolution and imaging/soundstaging. Increasing the capacitance in the output coupling caps of the Calypso Signature to 4uF DynamiCaps lowers the ~3dB low-frequency rolloff by half, providing improved bass definition and the ability to drive lower impedance loads. The better materials and construction of the DynamiCaps result in benefits similar to those provided by the Teflon-hybrid film/foil interstage caps.

As Wes mentioned, we also install adjustable-high-frequency, air-core capacitors. With an air-core capacitor there is no dielectric material, so dielectric absorption is minimized or eliminated. Although this is more labor-intensive, the ability to individually adjust each unit's high-frequency response achieves improved "air."

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What sticks most in your head about the new Serge Gainsbourg biopic, Gainsbourg, Je t'Aime... Moi Non Plus, [or Gainsbourg Vie héroïque], is the cigarettes: The blue haze that hangs in every frame. The film's central obsessive repetitive motion: grab a box of Gitanes, shake one out and then the most memorable touch of all by first-time director Joann Sfar: the slight crackle of a cigarette tip when first touched by flame.

Serge Gainsbourg smoked. A lot. Gitanes were the man's poisonous lifeblood. On the way out of the theater, I caught myself sniffing my clothes to make sure I wasn't back in the bad old days, when smoking was permitted in NYC clubs—the halcyon days of dry-cleaning in the five boroughs! As they had for many before him, cigarettes contributed mightily to Gainsbourg's death at age 61 on March 1, 1991—that, and the complex feelings he had surrounding his Jewishness and his big ears, big nose, and droopy visage: what he calls, throughout the film's 136 minutes, his "mug." Since his death, however, Gainsbourg's parallel reputations—as a songwriter and musical visionary who was leagues ahead of any artistic curve you can name, and as an indelibly colorful and epic character who was also, occasionally, louthily drunk—have done nothing but grow in influence. It's surprising that it's taken this long for someone to put his libidinous story to film.

Eric Elmosnino's eerie resemblance to the real Gainsbarre (a self-created nickname meant to signify his evil self) powers the entire movie. Sfar is a well-known writer and illustrator of comics and graphic novels, and his film includes playful animation and cartoonish fantasy elements—not to mention a wonderfully sassy turn by Kacey Mottet Klein as the young, perverse Lucien Ginsburg (Gainsbourg's given name). The result is a delightful, extremely well-made portrait that elicits both admiration and disgust for its main character. And Elmosnino's remarkable physical similarity to the subject gave me the oddly voyeuristic feeling of watching Gainsbourg playing himself.

The premiere of Gainsbourg, Je t'Aime... Moi Non Plus, [or Gainsbourg Vie héroïque] is an occasion to revisit Gainsbourg's remarkable legacy of recordings. Much like his diverse, troubled life, Gainsbourg's discography is a sometimes confusing puzzle. Although his recordings were released on a number of labels before and, especially, after his death, the vast majority of them were made for Philips between 1958 and 1991. However, the situation was hazy almost from the start; many individual songs were originally released on multiple formats, often beginning with a 7" single, then on an EP, and finally on a full-length LP. Early on, much of it was recorded in mono. By the mid-1960s, Gainsbourg's new material was available in both mono and stereo mixes. Subsequent reissues, remasterings, and licensing deals have only added to the jumble. But the many different packages available today—a number that may increase yet again with the film's wider release—believe the reality: the actual number of recordings that keep appearing and reappearing is relatively small. Although he wrote over 500 songs, probably 200 tracks form the basis of what is constantly in print.

In the US, whether you're buying downloads or physical media, the best place to start is with the Mercury/Philips releases, which can also be found with the Island and Verve names on them. Monsieur Gainsbourg, The Originals, Serge Gainsbourg, Initials SG, and the widely available French import, Gainsbourg...Forever, are all compilations that include the core of his best work. They mostly span his entire career, from his early days as a singer and writer of chansons, to his time as a songwriter for such singers as Juliette Greco, Petula Clark, and France Gall, to his affair with Brigitte Bardot, which inspired not only their duets on spoken-word musical tales like "Bonnie and Clyde," but also his most infamous composition, the orgasmic classic "Je t'aime... moi non plus" (I love you... me neither). Recorded with both Bardot (never released) and his later partner, British actress Jane Birkin, the simple, whiskey-driven bedroom tale features Gainsbourg and Birkin singing, and Birkin panting and finally climaxing. It was an international sensation that triggered bans in many countries and condemnation from the Vatican, yet also sold six million copies worldwide. It has since been covered by Donna Summer, Cat Power, the Pet Shop Boys, and many others.

These compilations also include Gainsbourg's later, even more controversial work—like "Lemon Incest," a duet with Charlotte Gainsbourg, his and Birkin's daughter, and now a recording artist in her own right; and "Aux armes et caetera," in which his setting of "La Marseillaise" to a reggae beat enraged, among others, French veterans of the Algerian war. By this time his music had evolved into a fascinating mix of rock guitars, jazz rhythms, dance beats, electronic, and elements of nearly every musical style imaginable. It is this combination of the variety of his far-reaching musical vision, reputation (some of it unearned), and a turbulent personal life that has made Gainsbourg such a powerful influence on subsequent generations of musicians.

Perhaps his finest single work, the concept album Histoire de Melody Nelson, was sampled by Prince Paul for De La Soul's Is Dead (released in 1991, the year of Gainsbourg's death), and is the admitted source of Beck's "Paper Tiger," from his Sea Change (2002). The Lolita-like story of a virginal teen, run over by a Rolls-Royce driven by an older man who later deserts her, has recently been reissued, by the brilliantly focused Seattle-based reissue label Light in the Attic, on 180gm vinyl in a gorgeous, heavy-gauge album sleeve with new liner notes. Four Men With Beards, the house label of Runt distribution in San Francisco and another of the mostly vinyl reissue labels that has grown during the LP's resurgence, has issued a 180gm edition of Aux armes et caetera (1979), the reggae album Gainsbourg made in Kingston, Jamaica, with an all-star crew that included drummer Lowell "Sly" Dunbar, bassist Robbie Shakespeare, and the indomitable I-Threes: Marcia Griffiths, Rita Marley, and Judy Mowatt. Even today, the fact that a guy who started out trying to sound like Charles Aznavour eventually got hip to reggae is a marvelous transition. Unlike what drifted up from his ever-present Gitane, Gainsbourg's genius has not dissipated.
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